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Achieving cultural sustainability through the preservation of video art: open distribution platforms

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Date of submission: July 2022

Accepted in: January 2023

Published in: January 2023

Recommended citation

Fernández Valdés, Paula. 2023. "Achieving cultural sustainability through the preservation of video art: open distribution platforms". In: Pau Alsina & Andrés Burbano (coords.). "Possibles". *Artnodes*, no. 31. UOC. [Accessed: dd/mm/yy]. <https://doi.org/10.7238/artnodes.v0i31.402845>



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Abstract

Video art has earned its spot within cultural heritage since the beginning of the 1970s, especially as a medium for activist practices, and it is now one of the most collected and exhibited artistic typologies in museums. The use of video art as a means of social protest and reflection continues to produce relevant artworks in the present day that constitute a part of our collective memory and that need to be safeguarded for the future, since they act as a valuable means of expression for marginal collectives and alternative ways of living. In this regard, the preservation of cultural heritage is a part of what has been called *cultural sustainability*: an essential part of sustainable development, which refers to the necessity of ensuring the access of future generations to past and current artistic practices.

The following research reflects on what cultural sustainability means for cultural institutions and museums, and how availability is fundamental to the preservation of video artworks, endangered by technological obsolescence. Specifically, single-channel video is examined from a conservator's perspective and some ethical considerations are examined regarding its obsolescence and reproducibility. Subsequently, with the idea that proliferation equals conservation, some

institutional initiatives are presented that use the Internet as an environment for video art distribution across the world; the issue of copyright is also examined, under the belief of open distribution and fair use.

What does the future of video art hold? How can we ensure sustainable cultural development? And is it possible for museums to balance private and public interests? This article reflects on these questions and tries to provide some answers based on the idea of preservation through open access.

Keywords

video art; activism; preservation; cultural sustainability; access

Lograr la sostenibilidad cultural mediante la conservación del videoarte: plataformas de libre distribución

Resumen

El videoarte se ha hecho hueco dentro del patrimonio cultural desde principios de los años setenta, especialmente como medio para las prácticas activistas, y constituye ahora uno de los géneros artísticos más recopilados y expuestos en los museos. El uso del videoarte como medio para la protesta social y la reflexión continúa produciendo obras de arte relevantes en el presente que constituyen una parte de nuestra memoria colectiva, y que deben preservarse para el futuro, ya que actúan como un valioso medio de expresión para los colectivos marginales y formas de vida alternativas. A este respecto, la conservación del patrimonio cultural forma parte de lo que se ha denominado sostenibilidad cultural, una parte esencial del desarrollo sostenible que se refiere a la necesidad de garantizar el acceso de las generaciones futuras a las prácticas artísticas pasadas y actuales.

La siguiente investigación refleja lo que significa la sostenibilidad cultural para las instituciones culturales y los museos, y cómo su disponibilidad es fundamental para la conservación de las obras de arte en vídeo, amenazadas por la obsolescencia tecnológica. Específicamente, se examina el vídeo de canal único desde la perspectiva de un conservador de arte, y se estudian algunas consideraciones éticas con respecto a su obsolescencia y reproducibilidad. Posteriormente, partiendo de la idea de que la proliferación equivale a conservación, se presentan algunas iniciativas institucionales que utilizan internet como entorno para la distribución de videoarte en todo el mundo, así como se analiza el tema de los derechos de autor, considerándolos desde la perspectiva de una libre distribución y uso justo de estos.

¿Qué futuro le depara al videoarte? ¿Cómo podemos garantizar un desarrollo cultural sostenible? ¿Y es posible que los museos encuentren un equilibrio entre los intereses privados y públicos? Este artículo reflexiona sobre estas preguntas e intenta proporcionar algunas respuestas basadas en la idea de conservación a través del libre acceso.

Palabras clave

videoarte; activismo; conservación; sostenibilidad cultural; acceso

1. Activist video art: a valuable cultural heritage

On the morning of 4 October 1965, Nam June Paik, stuck in a traffic jam inside a taxi on the streets of New York, took out his camera – the revolutionary Sony Portapak – and recorded from his car window the visit of Pope Paul VI. That same night, he showed the recording to some friends in what has been traditionally considered the first video artwork of history. The affinity of the video technique with the representation of human existence is one of the reasons why artists like Nam June Paik saw in the video signal the revolutionary potential to faithfully represent their life experiences (Panea & Martínez-Collado 2017, 30) and take a step further in the history of artistic creation. In his own words:

“From Monet to Joseph Kosuth, people tried everything. After that, in painting’s world, everything was done. [...] One way to move painting forward was to inject the element of time” (Miller, Moore & Paik 1984).

From that moment, video would soon establish itself as a prolific artistic medium, mostly in western societies where technologies were more easily available, and especially during the so-called “second avant-gardes”. These movements of the 1960s and 1970s embodied some of the claims of modernity such as the dematerialization of the work of art and the active experience of the spectator-participant. The ephemeral nature of video, a result of its rapid technical obsolescence as well as its technical reproducibility, was considered by many artists a virtue: a desirable characteristic that made it the appropriate medium to isolate oneself from the art market and commercialisation (Meigh-Andrews 2006, 5).

Concurrent with the development of the second avant-garde and its claims against the art world, the 1960s were characterised by important countercultural movements which naturally affected the themes dealt with in video art. In this context, the artist-activists believed that their actions could change society. From a collectivist perspective, artists accepted not only their responsibility to transform the art world (Panea & Martínez-Collado 2004, 5), but also their ability to address the injustices around them, which they portrayed in their work.

The freedom offered by the videographic medium, which allowed creation with fewer formal limits, favoured the appropriation of the medium by groups with social and political messages, which dealt with issues as relevant as violence, gender, sexuality and racial discrimination.

In some cases, artists used television images; this was the case, for example, of Wolf Vostell and his work *Deutscher Ausblick* (1958), or the later anti-militarist work *Vietnam* (1971), which shows images of bombings in a loop as a critique of the cruelty of the events and rejection of weapons and aggression: a recurring theme in his output.

In others, the accessibility of the video signal, especially after the commercialisation of the Portapak technology in 1965 (Lovejoy 1989, 193), allowed female artists such as Shigeko Kubota and Martha Rosler to create works with feminist themes, the impact of which would have been smaller in other media traditionally dominated by the male gender (Meigh-Andrews 2006, 8). Because of its novelty and relatively few cultural connotations at the time, video became an alternative tool for feminist collectives (Lovejoy 1989, 202). This is the case, for example,

of Rosler’s iconic piece *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) (figure 1), a parody of a televised cooking show in which she names and shows all the typical kitchen utensils in alphabetical order, with aggressive and disturbing gestures that assert her frustration as a woman in the face of the oppression of domestic work.



Figure 1. *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975)

Source: Martha Rosler. © MOCA Los Angeles

Video was also used as a tool for political protest: artists appropriated the television signal and created decentralised programmes of collective and self-managed production, mostly broadcast on local or pirate channels, offering viewers alternative means of obtaining information. This was the case, for example, for the TVTV collective – an abbreviation for Top Value Television – which produced high-quality documentaries with political content (Fifer & Hall 1990, 56), or others, such as Raindance, whose member Michael Shamberg coined the term Guerrilla TV in his homonymous 1971 publication.

In those early years, the video technique became popular because of its immediacy, accessibility and ease of use, as well as the possibility of exercising political criticism through it (Meigh-Andrews 2006, 260). But video art is not only a part of past heritage, but also of present heritage; video activism is very much alive. In the last years, with the advent of digital technologies, video has established itself as a discipline outside the traditional circuits of Europe and the United States and has become a global phenomenon (Meigh-Andrews 2006, 246). The popularity and appreciation of protest videos made by non-western artists can be seen in video art events such as the Eye Art & Film Prize in Amsterdam and the Turner Prize in the UK.

To offer some examples from the past few years, in 2019, Meriem Bennani was selected as the winner of the Eye Art & Film Prize. Bennani is a North African woman, born in Rabat in 1988, whose videos – an aesthetic mix of documentary and 3D technology – deal with issues such as neo-colonialism and the refugee crisis. Her artworks are characterised by their light comic tone, with magic realism undercurrents that challenge viewers to review their own habits and political ideas.

This can be seen in video works such as *MISSION TEENS: French school in Morocco* (2019) (figure 2), which gathers a group of students in a mixed montage between reality television and documentary and follows their everyday life, showing the difficulties of shaping identities within complex cultural environments.



Figure 2. *MISSION TEENS: French School in Morocco* (2019)

Source: Meriem Bennani. © Meriem Bennani

Another relevant example of video activism is the 2021 winner, the Karrabing Film Collective, a group of indigenous Australians whose video work reflects the reality of their community and the effects of colonialism, poverty, and climate change with a view to repairing the relationship between these communities and their history, their traditions, and their own culture. In their work *The Mermaids* (2018) (figure 3), the collective shows a toxic world, poisoned by white people; in this dystopia, the survivors experiment on indigenous children – the only ones who can survive outdoors. The parallels with Australia's recent history invite the spectator to reflect on colonial heritage, ecological destruction and responsibilities (Wander 2020).



Figure 3. *The Mermaids* (2018)

Source: Karrabing Film Collective. © Karrabing Film Collective

On the other hand, the Turner Prize, held annually in the UK and recognised as one of the most prestigious awards in relation to contemporary art, is another example of the value of video art in today's artistic environment.

In 1996, it selected for the first time a video artist as a winner, the British artist Douglas Gordon; since then, six of the winners to date have been video artists (Meigh-Andrews 2006, 329). In 2018, in fact, all four nominees were video artists, and all worked around social activism. The winner, Charlotte Prodger, whose work reflects on Scottish independence and queer identity, and the other three artists, Willis Thompson, with his videos on black identity and racial inequalities; Naeem Mohaiemen, with his visual investigations of post-colonialism in South Asia and Forensic Architecture, a famous collective of artists whose work – highly rigorous audiovisual documentaries – transcends the artistic barrier and has come to be used in trials related to the human rights of the inhabitants of Palestine (Kimmelman 2018), are great examples of the liveness of the video art activist practice.

In parallel to these European prizes, there are other examples, such as the Sovereign Asian Art Prize launched in 2003 and the Norval Sovereign African Art Prize launched in 2021, which have highlighted media or video contemporary artists, placing value on alternative narratives and opening the exhibition space to diverse artists that had historically been marginalized.

2. Cultural sustainability and museums: single-channel video and some ethical considerations regarding preservation

As we have seen, video art is not only a technical product, but its content constitutes a valuable testimony of contemporary social dynamics (Sturken 1989, 67). Therefore, it is a part of cultural heritage, which is defined by UNESCO as “the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations” (Pasikowska-Schnass 2018, 2). Its knowledge is fundamental to develop better societies; as Brian Graham stated in his paper *Heritage as Knowledge: Capital or Culture?*, “heritage is that part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes, whether they be economic or cultural (including political and social factors)” (Graham 2002, 1006).

According to many experts, cultural heritage – including video art – can also be a driver of sustainable development in relation to what has been established as “cultural sustainability”. We understand sustainable development to be that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Secretary-General and Development 1987, 24). Within this notion of sustainable development,

“cultural sustainability is considered to be the fourth pillar of sustainable development and can be defined as the consideration, preservation, and presentation of tangible and intangible heritage, artistic production, as well as the knowledge and skills of various social groups, communities, and nations” (Stylianou-Lambert, Boukas & Christodoulou-Yerali 2014, 569).

“A sustainable society depends on a sustainable culture” (Pop *et al.* 2019, 970), meaning that there should be access to cultural resources between generations and that development should respect the cultural capital of society. In this scenario, museums have “considerable social significance” (Ahmed, Qaed & Almurbati 2020, 1) and are in charge of ensuring accessibility to contemporary heritage, including video art – but how should they do this?

First of all, it is important that museums and institutions collect video art and preserve it, so that cultural knowledge can be passed on to generations to come. Secondly, museums now more than ever have a duty to educate society, not only in order to strengthen its cultural identity and sense of belonging but also to encourage the development of new values and ensure diversity (Pop *et al.* 2019). In order to do that, first we need to establish a knowledge of the nature of video art from a conservation perspective, identifying the relationship between its essential components and the need to care for it.

Since that historical moment when Paik made the very first tape, many artists have used the video signal, on its own or as a tool in a hybrid of other artistic disciplines, developing sub-categories such as video sculpture, video installation or video performance, that were very popular in the last decades of the past century and are common in museum exhibitions and private collections nowadays. Despite being highly relevant, for the purposes of this paper we will focus only on single-channel video.

From a preservation point of view, this type of artwork is independent of space and displays; it is encoded information – in the case of analogue technology, through the frequencies recorded on magnetic tape, and in the case of digital, with transformation into ones and zeros. As such, the same medium or format can be reproduced, in the sense of the verb to *play* or to be *played*, put into operation and materialised, in any place and on any device.

In this sense, as it is not indissolubly tied to a specific space, action or unique and particular physical device, single-channel video is the only video art typology that possesses freedom of distribution. This is different from other video-related artistic manifestations, such as video-sculpture works, aestheticized devices with a fixed appearance, or video installations, which are related to space; in the case of single-channel video work, only a display capable of reproducing is required, the nature of which is generally not essential.

On the other hand, we can refer to a second meaning of reproducible, in the sense that single-channel video can be copied repeatedly for distribution. When a video recording is made, the camera transforms the image into encoded data on a carrier. This is a standardised and specialised code, comparable, for example, to the notation of sound in a score, except that it is not interpreted and decoded by a human being but by a machine. When considered in this way, the video image can be recomposed through an infinite number of different processes, and it is possible to obtain the same audiovisual information not only through different playback devices but also from recording formats.

This consideration of the self-sufficiency of single-channel video offers great possibilities in terms of preservation strategies, which will usually be more dynamic than for other types of works of art.

Although these elements are not essentially attached to the meaning of most single-channel video, and therefore not relevant for the conservator in the way that other artistic objects are, we cannot play the image without the display. Therefore, video is in a way dependent on the technical development of the machines that make it possible; it is inescapably tied to the obsolescence of such devices, which have a shorter life span than other artistic materials. To fight against obsolescence, video preservation includes the migration to newer formats and the digitalisation of analogue tapes.

Once it has been digitalised, because of its reproducible nature, and the fact that digital files can be copied without loss of information, single-channel video becomes perfect for sharing – indeed, the greatest effect of digitalisation is proliferation (Rinehart & Ippolito 2014, 163) – especially through online platforms.

In this regard, we need to take a moment to take into consideration the issues that digitalisation and proliferation provoke in the art preservation field, which are related to the ethical discourse of originality and authenticity.

Authenticity and originality are key considerations for the valuation of art, and they guide many preservation practices, but since the emergence of procedural and ephemeral artworks, these values have shifted and cannot be applied to contemporary artworks in the same way as they could to traditional artworks.

Ethical debates in the field of media art preservation in the last thirty years feature two different theoretical approaches, shifting from a traditional approach that values originality to an evolutionary approach when greater attention is paid to ensuring the future of the artwork through change.

On the one hand, some projects maintain a conservative and historical approach, asserting that the original version of the work is relevant as a historical document and that the authenticity of the artwork should not be hastily sacrificed to the existing or apparent pressure of technical innovation. This was the case for the project *Digital Art Conservation*, directed by Bernhard Serexhe, who recently stated:

“But against all critical insights, we continue to live in the jubilant phase of digitization. As if it were the most unavoidable of our duties, masses of historical documents and analogue art works [sic] of all kinds are being forcibly digitised all over the world to save them, as they say, from loss and perishing. However, almost no one is interested in the fact that this does not save the works themselves in their original form, but that the preserved digitized data is no more than a mediocre reduction, just an extremely vulnerable substitute for the original objects” (Serexhe 2021, 5).

However, despite these concerns, even the more traditional-minded projects admit that the legitimate desire to preserve authenticity should not lead to the work’s disintegration because of technical failure; there is a need for balance. In this regard, it is not unreasonable to think about

digitalisation only as a means for producing exhibition copies that allow for a strategy of preservation through accessibility and proliferation, without neglecting the integrity of the original formats.

Thus, other change-supportive projects appeared, such as the well-known Variable Media Initiative, arguing that obsolescence can be overcome by substituting analogue technologies for new formats, “performing a layered preservation strategy that admits fragments, traces, emulation, re-creation and reassemblage” (Depocas, Ippolito & Jones 2003, 25). In this case, traditional concepts of authenticity and originality of the material will not always be suitable, but the artwork can be kept alive in newer forms that allow for better availability and proliferation.

3. Preserving video art through dissemination: institutional sharing initiatives and the issue of intellectual property

There is no preservation without memory (Rinehart & Ippolito 2014, 86), and availability is a key step to guaranteeing and nourishing collective memory and a collective sense of belonging; digitalisation and proliferation prove to be essential for preservation and therefore for cultural sustainability (Pop *et al.* 2019). Once the work has been safeguarded, the next step is to ensure its availability. However, video art is a difficult artistic typology to exhibit in museums, since the amount of time needed for its visualisation is usually long, which can cause visitors to lose interest.

The self-sufficiency of single-channel video allows institutions to use new spaces, such as the Internet. In this case, the virtual space is almost infinite, there are no physical limitations, and it allows access to the work of art from a greater range of places and social strata. The Web is a great public square, and that is precisely what art seeks today, as Danto warned in *Beyond the Brillo Box* (2003):

“What we now see is an art that seeks more immediate contact with people than the museum allows – art in public places, specific to given locations – while for its part the museum is struggling to accommodate itself to the immense pressures it receives from inside and outside art” (Danto 2003, 26).

In this scenario, museums are up to the task. An important contribution to this purpose is, for example, the European digital library, known as Europeana, created in 2008 by the Council of the European Union through the Digital Agenda for Europe and the largest European cultural heritage website. Its objectives are accessibility and education, and it provides access to content from more than 3,500 institutions, from international museums to regional archives. Digitalised content in Europeana is complemented by contextualisation (Macri & Cristofaro 2020, 386-88). In the words of Jonathan Purday:

“It promotes discovery and networking opportunities in a multilingual space where users can engage, share in and be inspired by the rich diversity of Europe’s cultural and scientific heritage” (Purday 2012, 1).

In this case, the dream of Rinehart and Ippolito, of museums whose authority is used to facilitate and engage a community rather than treat the visitors as passive cultural consumers, becomes a reality (Rinehart & Ippolito 2014, 106).

Another great European example is the institution LIMA, previously known as Montevideo and the Netherlands Institute for Media Arts. The memory of Dutch media art is not only preserved by LIMA through its collection and archive, but also through its digital repository and conservation services for various museums, artists, archives and collectors. LIMA’s archival website is for public use and contains previews of all their works in distribution: up to 17,000 videos and installations.

The US was also a precursor in video art distribution, Electronic Arts Intermix, founded in 1971, is one of the leading non-profit organizations. The EAI also emerged from a commercial gallery, the Howard Wise Gallery, which hosted – among others – the first video-dedicated exhibition in the US, *TV as a Creative Medium*. Its online catalogue provides access to information about 175 artists and 3,000 pieces of work, as well as other research materials regarding video formats and preservation; similarly to LIMA, only excerpts of the works can be streamed (Zippay 2005, 191).

Outside of western institutions, there are other noteworthy examples, such as the recently developed Nam June Paik Video Archive of the Nam June Paik Art Center in South Korea, designed by the initiative Public Access Digital Media Archive, an open-source archive run by CAMP. This archive presents the viewer with an organised display of 175 videos from the collection, including time-based transcripts, annotations and edits that allow the users to “go beyond their initial purposes, ultimately discovering and creating new meanings in the networks of the individual videos” (Hölling 2022, 14). In these online environments, the museum becomes part of a wider network of care in which the citizen directly participates in documenting and preserving the video artworks.

The selected initiatives are shaping the future preservation of single-channel video art; however, one important issue remains to be discussed, the issue of intellectual property. Despite its anti-art status, video art is also a commodity in the art market. This duality requires, as we have stated, the need for educational and cultural access, but also a viable market for artists’ work; therefore, institutions need to consider copyright and distribution rights when sharing video art online.

Video content can be extraordinarily complex. Some works involve numerous authors or appropriate other content that requires separate licensing agreements; restrictions also vary from one country to another, which makes it difficult to reach any common methodology or conclusion. When a video art piece is created, the author must decide on the property rights and reach a clear agreement during the acquisition of the work with the institution – this would be the ideal scenario. If the author is no longer alive, institutions will have to wait until the content enters the public domain or else negotiate with other stakeholders.

The legal situations of the initiatives highlighted in this section differ greatly from one another. Some work with video art that is already in the public domain – as in the case of Europeana – and others only share online snippets of the works, but provide on-demand access for researchers, such as LIMA or EAI. Besides the public domain, museums can still make their collections available through what is known as “fair use”.

Fair use is a subjective notion: a legal doctrine that allows the use of copyrighted material without the need to acquire permission, balancing the private and the public interest. This doctrine has been used by artists and scholars to create and produce works and can also be used by museums to distribute their video collections. As some legal scholars argued when asked about the definition of the term by Kenneth Goldsmith, the founder of the open archive UbuWeb, fair use is:

“the decision to assemble related material in a way that it makes possible kinds of inquiry and comparison and consumption and appreciation that were not formerly possible, [...] putting it into dialogue with other work, making it available to a community that it wouldn't normally be available to” (Goldsmith 2020, 68).

As long as institutions engage in research and recontextualization, the availability of their collections can be justified by fair use and will only reinforce preservation, ensuring the transmission of video heritage to new generations.

Conclusions

Video art has proven to be a valuable tool for human expression and is relevant to social movements that have shaped our recent history. Nowadays, video artists continue to pursue social topics in order to offer society an environment for reflection and to foster change. Video art, therefore, is a relevant cultural heritage that should be preserved for future generations as a part of what we understand as cultural sustainability. This sustainability is based on the practice of access to past and present heritage, allowing communities to engage in conversations around their own heritage and to create new and relevant works of art.

Regarding video art – particularly single-channel video – we need to think about its nature as a reproducible file, which gives us a valuable advantage against obsolescence in terms of preservation. Since reproduction equals proliferation, public institutions can ensure the availability of this type of heritage through online platforms, and this article has highlighted some great public initiatives.

However, these institutional video archives are subject to the issue of copyright and property rights, which hinders open access. In order to resolve this, institutions should obtain artists' consent to show their video work online during the acquisition of new pieces; regarding work by artists who are no longer alive, public domain may be granted. If this is not the case, museums should turn to the idea of fair use and advocate for the relevance of openly showing such work in order to create new meanings and share community values. For this author, who advocates for free access to audiovisual heritage, this was in the spirit of the video

art pioneers and video activists and thus should be preserved along with the images they created.

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Degree in Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage from the Complutense University of Madrid and Master's in Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Assets from the Universitat Politècnica de València. Currently studying a Doctorate in Art: Production and Research with the Predocctoral Contract for the Training of Research Staff (FPI-UPV) at the same university, while studying for a Law degree at UNED. Her work focuses on the intersection between art and science, developing new preservation strategies for New Media Art. Part of the EShID MICIU Project for R+D+i, headed by the research group Visu@ls. Visual culture and identity politics (UCLM).

