Interview with Gaby Wijers

Gaby Wijers is the Director of LIMA (Living Media Art Foundation), located in Amsterdam that preserves, distributes and researches media art. She was formerly head of conservation and collection at the NIMk, the Netherlands Media Art Institute, also known as Montevideo.

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Interviewers: Crystal Sanchez and James Smith

Please tell us about your background in working with time-based media and digital artworks.

I am trained as a librarian and studied informatics. For quite a while, I was dedicated to working with information systems for cultural heritage collections. I was also working for the theater institute in the 1980s and 90s and there a lot of preservation issues came up, which provided me with an introduction to preservation and documentation issues, such as how to describe a performance or dance piece, or how to preserve posters and costumes and also photographs and videos. I made a lot of collection information systems over the years and controlled vocabularies. Sometime in the mid-90s, Montevideo asked me to conduct research on digitally preserving video art. I did this research and coordinated the related projects in the Netherlands on project base.

Sometime around the end of the 1990s, there was something we called "the second preservation phase" where many Dutch collections, roughly 15, worked together to preserve their video art collection, and I coordinated the whole process. The artists were asked for a good source and then we transferred it. At that time, Digital BetaCam was the standard, and of course documentation and contact with the artist was very important, so we did many artist interviews and everything was transferred to Digital BetaCam. Over the years, I participated in many research projects, *OAIS archive projects,* best practice and research into the work of the Vasulkas. I participated in *40 4 object unknown*, *Inside Installations, Inside Movement Knowledge* and so on.

Over the last years the Netherlands Media Art Institute (NIMk) did again a big national preservation project where we transferred the works to Uncompressed AVI files and stored these uncompressed files, these master files that are not touched, and transferred to LTO tape and we also made MPEG-2 presentation pieces and MPEG-4 copies for online use.[1] My role in this is often to initiate the projects and coordinate technical and management of these projects. In the Netherlands we have a Foundation for the Preservation of Contemporary Art, the SBMK, and we cooperate with them as well as the RCE, the Institute of Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands. Formally, I was employed as the head of collections

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[1] To read more about LIMA's process visit *The digitisation of media artworks by Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas,* a DCA case study.

and preservation at the Netherlands Media Art Institute. From the first of January this year on, we founded the new foundation dedicated to sustainable access to media art called LIMA, and I'm the director of LIMA. We provide preservation services and storage for video and born-digital artworks and do distribute our own collection. In a brief way, this is a summary of my experience.

The model of working collaboratively and between institutions is interesting. Could you speak about what makes that possible? Do standards come out of collaborating across institutions on a national scale?

In a way it does, but we also come up with a proposal, like, technically this could be a way to deal with it and then we check how other sister institutions deal with it. For instance, we did research on the technical aspects, asking, "What would be the best ways to store digital files?" and then we contacted, for instance, the Bay Area Video Coalition, Electronic Arts Intermix, ZKM, Johannes Gfeller, Jürgen Enge, and Pip Laurenson. We asked them for feedback, and then we discussed the feedback with the museums—and we do not only work for the museums—we also work for the artists. NIMk (Netherlands Media Art Institute) was originally an arts distributor, so there is very close contact to the artists and the art practice. NIMk and LIMA are not museums, but are more art institutions that are very practically based. But the fact that we work with so many technicians and museums over the years, we have gained expertise by learning-by-doing, and discussing with the field.

Do you feel that you have been able to develop technical standards? You spoke about your AVI files. With so many stakeholders—artists, organizations, etc.— have you been able to develop standards that you can point to? Or, at what point is it that every single artwork needs its own attention?

I believe there is no such thing as "one size fits all." Nevertheless, there is a majority that could be handled in a certain way, but it should be very controlled, quality controlled- so to check if the particular artwork needs a different approach. It is rather a standard—there are not that many exceptions and I am only talking about video art. Over the years, much knowledge has been gained in this field. We try to stay informed about all the projects that are going on, as far as we can, and check out what the deliverables are and if there are any new procedures or checkups that we can make, and then we keep those procedures in the workflow. It is a standard yes, but it is not a standard like ISO because it is used in the Netherlands for this specific field.

What differences do you see between standards and best practices, and do you think there is space in this field to create standards for technical needs of artworks?

I can imagine that standards may refer more to quality control and workflow. There is still some work to be done to find out parameters - maybe parameters is the best word. For video art I guess there is a gained knowledge and a lot of people are aware of what the procedures and standards could and should be, depending on the end results, of course. I don't think there will ever be one standard to preserve video art. There will always be differences between video art and video in general. It also depends on the value of the

work, the artist's intention, authenticity, quality, and the way to present it in the future. If you look at how film is digitized, there is often a different standard because of the different presentation standards. Films presented at film museums are often presented in a cinematic setting, where media art is often not; it is used in exhibitions and so on. So we have different settings. Broadcast archives are also different, not only because the amount of material is far, far bigger than the small amount of media artworks that we preserve, but because the end result is for a different use.

I thought a bit about the differences between best practices, guidelines, and standards. Best practices are like examples, where guidelines are seen more as checklists based on an institution's unique workflow and way that they deal with their metadata, collection information system, and legal issues. Some institutions are able to use big preservation reports in how they deal with video. There is a data sheet for cataloguing video tapes. It is a sheet made by my colleagues from Bern, Agathe Jarczyk and Joanna Phillips made extensive sheets for cataloguing and transferring video tapes. For preservation, there should always be a way to preserve the files or the tapes, and make it in a way that it can be used for different purposes in the future.

We use OAIS standards for the planning of the insertion of the data and the files for the checkups as well as the delivery of the files for presentation. All these standards [OAIS, etc] are adapted to our own needs. I think that every institution works like that. I think these standards are very interesting for video art and that is working well. Now looking at born-digital art and interactive art, this is a research topic at the moment, we see if such a standard, a spectrum, or OAIS, works for that. Then again, we have to make sure and discuss and research these parameters. I think combined research in what these parameters are and how to execute them would be very helpful.

You mentioned OAIS; are there any other standards that you rely on?

We are looking at different ISO standards to see if they are helpful for digitizing and workflow. What is still unclear is how to deal with the never-ending process of a continuous workflow and to find a protocol for that. Within digitizing and sustainable digital storage and accessibility of media art, it is an ongoing process. I am not sure yet how these standards behave in such an ongoing process.

Do the guidelines you develop include guidelines for data and information that should be collected at the time the work is accessioned into the collection?

In the past, we had a strategy to preserve the video artworks when they were seven or ten years old and then they would be transferred. Nowadays almost everything is delivered digital- the new works. So we immediately check the delivered files and then transfer them as needed.

Do you also collect information on artistic intent? What would allow for the maintenance of authenticity over time or is it mainly more technical?

When a work is more installation-based, we collect more data about authenticity and we do that also on a case study basis. However, we do not do it for every title.

Do you have a template for conducting artist's interviews?

Yes we do. We digitized 1500 titles over the last two years. So, it is hardly possible to also do all of the interviews and get all of the information about the authenticity and how to deal with a work in the future.

Have you been able to group these works into classifications- are you able to create case studies for one and then move forward for the rest of the group? If so, can you speak about the differences between these classifications in terms of what level does a work fit into a class? Is it by format, or others? Is it too hard to define?

I think it's too hard. Basically we can group works- like all black and white registrations could be a group. Works by artists that use the maximum of the possibilities of coloring or using noise like special video artifacts can be grouped.

I would like to ask about the Netherland's national approach to preserving media artworks. Is this model- or approach- influencing how people outside the Netherlands are approaching similar issues? Also, do you know of any other countries that are using this collective national approach to this problem?

No, I'm not aware of any exactly similar approach. I guess in a way I'm not sure if the Dutch are in general that collaborative on a national level. Within the preservation of contemporary art, there is big group of the contemporary art museums that work together on research and that makes sense. The field is still sort of unsecure and in need of certain guidance and a platform for exchange. Together with the Foundation of the Conservation of Contemporary Art, we tried to develop standards, but also an acquisition contract for video or born-digital art along with rules on how to present works online, and of course preservation. Since we have done this for quite a while already, the museums in the Netherlands in a way outsource their storage and preservation of the video arts works to us.

Can you speak a little bit about the storage set-up that you've managed to build in terms of the technical infrastructure? Is the set-up different because you are storing artworks?

We do more quality checks. We store copies in house but also outside. We run checksums and other quality checks at least once a year. The LTO tapes are 1 to 1 copies. The presentation files are not restored but nevertheless changed. For instance, we masked them now and we didn't do that in the past. Since now hardly anything is presented on old TV monitors but a lot of it is presented on other screens. A lot of information is seen on projections where it should not be seen so we mask it. Just one example.

Has your thinking had to change from your foundational library training as you've moved into this field of time-based media art? What in your training have you found to be most helpful and useful?

From the start, I also worked describing theater performances. Next to describing objects I also worked for museums. So in describing objects or a document, we always described life elements. I was quite used to that. I think that is often lacking in basic education. Media art

is more process based and not only object based. You can describe the certain video of course and you should but you also have to describe the artwork. The artwork is laid down on a certain video tape. Having a different videotape with the same work is still considered the same work, so you have to have this entity on top of the material. If we have an artwork and it has fifteen different tapes or files, then it is still only one artwork related to all of these different files. In all kinds of library rules or protocols there are some ways to deal with that.

I think that thinking about these parameters and structuring information was a benefit. You always need to know what information you need and then you also need to find a way to group it. I guess it is something very useful in this field. On the other hand, I also think I don't have the biggest technical background; yet I have some. For a librarian it is similar. If you have this technical background or this information structure background it is also very helpful for being an intermediate between the conservation and the registrar and the artist or the technicians. Someone can tell about changing a certain format but you need to be able to understand what it means and what questions to ask. And I think with such a background, you are able to, maybe. I was often puzzled by how to work on this training. Would it be helpful to educate technical people with ethical skills on art preservation? I always thought that would be very helpful. On the other hand, the contemporary art restorers, from that side, to be trained with far more technical skills. We collaborate with the University of Amsterdam. The University of Amsterdam has a restoration section. At the University of Amsterdam there is also a master for the presentation of the preservation of the moving image. For both of the groups combined we do a one month workshop each year. I am also a guest lecturer. They have three or four blocks of lessons for three hours about media art preservation. Then we focus a little bit more on the video art preservation.

What does that month look like? What topics do you tackle? Do you work hands-on with artworks?

Yes. The workshop is in three sections. The first section discusses art conservation models and theory. For instance, the artist interview methodology or the decision making model or the decision making tree, like what the DOCAM uses. So these kinds of tools and explanations. In another section, people from the field come and talk about their practices or we go somewhere like the Museum. We discuss certain installations, and then the groups of students, about 12 to 16 people, work together under the guidance of a restorer and with feedback from me and my team, documenting and reinstallation of media art installations. They also have an end presentation. At this end presentation they also get feedback from invited professionals working in the field.

Are *the participant's people who are already practitioners in the field that need to add to their technical skills and experience in this areas, or are they new practitioners?*

They are the students from Conservation and Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Art combined with the students from the master of Presentation and Preservation of the Moving Images. They have some background but they don't have much work experience. Where the people from restoration are really used to working with objects but seldom

work with the media art objects. We also want to do a summer school next year. We want to open with a similar approach but open it up to the field for international training.

Do you think this month-long symposium model is successful, and what other training opportunities are needed for professionals?

I think more internships are needed and helpful training experiences, and working together on actual case studies. I think most of the time giving students guidance - where they can find the information they need- but at the end it is about gaining confidence in what you are doing. I guess you learn that hands-on.

In time-based media art conservation, do you think the future is going to be more people that are specifically trained in technology or do you think it will be people who have training in conservation that are learning technological needs in the course of their practical work?

I think there is a dependence on digital art objects curating- so probably a specialization within time-based media conservation and contemporary art conservation. At the same time the amount of art is still a few, and maybe not that many people are interested in it. I think it may it is better to offer some technical training while people already have a job.

What are the technical challenges that you face today? Are there certain works that are more challenging than others? Do some need more research?

It depends if you're only working with single channel video and the equipment is important. Or if the work depends on interactivity. I guess on working with the files there are many things similar to working with other digital files, although the parameters are different. In general there are a lot of similarities. Working on restoring or replacing the equipment for presentation has different technical challenges. Then, of course, how to emulate or visualize a media artwork. I'm not sure if it can be done by a conservator that is not technically trained. The best thing to do is to train the conservators to a certain level of knowledge - how to interpret all these technical changes.

Any last thoughts?

I would be interested in to do a combined program or project internationally. I once visited the annual meeting of the AIC. There were quite some case studies presented in the time of *Inside Installations*. We discussed training and I can imagine we'd cooperate not only in exchanging information like we are doing now but also working together on knowledge transfer and education projects, and then distributing that knowledge.

In talking about distributing knowledge, have you been successful in bringing together the technicians that are very technically minded with conservators? How can conservators learn very technical skills?

We are very lucky to have some communicative technicians and they have quite some experience of over the years getting so much experience in explaining or telling the conservators or the restorers about technical issues, which is very helpful. And this is how conservators can learn these things.

How is this collaboration created? Is this just from years of working together or learning from each other or are you just lucky you have great technicians?

Of course they are great; it is also that we selected them for their communication skills when there were more technicians, and working together over time and gaining your knowledge and your expertise, then cooperating with restorers, students, and other technicians in research projects also does create this collaborative-ness.

Resources

Project Preservation Media Art Collection Netherlands by Paulien 't Hoen, Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (SBMK) and Gaby Wijers, Dutch Institute for Media Art (NIMk).

The digitisation of media artworks by Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas by Gaby Wijers (LIMA) with peer reviewers Emanuel Lorrain (PACKED vzw) and Rony Vissers (PACKED vzw) as part of the Digitizing Contemporary Art (DCA) project.

D6.1 Guidelines for a Long-term Preservation Strategy for Digital Reproductions and Metadata by Sofie Laier Henriksen, Wiel Seuskens & Gaby Wijers (NIMk). External reviewer Robert Gillesse (DEN). Part of the Digitizing Contemporary Art Project (DCA).