Interview with Paul Messier

> Paul Messier is an independent conservator of photographs. In 1998 he founded the Electronic Media Group of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC). He was elected to the AIC board for two terms, serving from 2004-2010. While on the board his major initiatives included the publication of the AIC Guide to Digital Photography and Conservation Documentation (2008), the transfer of ConservationOnline and the ConservationDislist from Stanford University (2009), and the establishment of the Conservation Catalog Wiki (2009).

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Interviewers: Crystal Sanchez and James Smith

Please tell us about your experience with time-based media art conservation.

It was around 1997-2000 when I realized that electronic media conservation issues needed a place at the American Institute of Conservation (AIC). At the time, I did a lot of work that contributed to making sure that those issues were brought into the mainstream of the conservation profession.

Could you talk about what prompted your interest in that area and what the nature of your work was at that time?

I remember going to a meeting with members of the Photographic Materials Group, which is an AIC sub-group that is focused on conservation issues with photographs. At that time, in the mid-late 90s, talks about digital photography were beginning—whether it was digital still photography, moving images, or digital output, like inkjet prints and things like that. There was much discussion among the Group as to whether—or maybe it was just me being sensitive to it, I don't know how big of an issue it really was—these types [of works] really belonged in the Photographic Materials Group. The Group also discussed whether an image divorced from any sort of material incarnation, purely an electronic image, was really a photograph or not.

That started me thinking, well, if this group is uncomfortable in embracing images that have a solely electronic basis, then maybe there needed to be another group that would engage in these issues. It was very clear that a bit is a bit; in other words, it didn't matter if it was a still image bit or a moving image bit, or a multichannel installation piece based on bits. The preservation issues were universal across the digital realm. It became clear after working with people like Mona Jimenez, who is now at NYU, that the looming issues weren't only focused on digital works, which is where I started, but looking back to the 1940s, any electronic-based cultural works, including analog, were involved. So with all

these tape-based works, I became aware of the huge need to preserve media, both analog and digital.

I began reading and attending conferences to educate myself as a conservator about how we would go about developing a discipline within conservation that was dedicated to these different media—electronic, digital, and all of that. Many specialists approached it from their own areas of expertise, whether it was technical video production or audio, engineering, or industry based. This was very familiar to me as a photograph conservator, because in the early days of photograph conservation—the early days being the late 1970s to early 1990s—within a professional context, the same kind of thing happened. There was a lot of industry engagement and academic engagement, and many people coming in from various specialties. All were concerned with preservation, but not necessarily trained in preservation. Eventually, even though that kind of input was welcome, what eventually took over was a more disciplined, professional conservation approach that was much more aligned with widely accepted conservation ethics and standards of practice. That was a good thing for photography conservation. I think it is going to be a good thing for electronic media preservation.

In an overarching sense, I do not see such a fundamental break as some people may see between electronic-based object and an analog object. I think the fundamental and historic [difference is that] if you go back to the beginning of image-making—for example the caves in Lascaux—to make an image, you needed to manipulate materials. Any image had to have some sort of material-based incarnation. So really, the historic shift that is taking place is that [the connection with materials] is not necessarily so anymore. You can have images, video or still or different projections, that are completely independent of materials in many ways. So that is an interesting break and a historic break, and it certainly got my attention.

But overall, I see the transition between analog and digital as an evolutionary change. I think most contemporary conservators who have a broad background and training, and understand conservation ethics don't necessarily give themselves enough credit when confronted with a digital-based or electronic-based work of art. Conservators have the tool set to deal with the issues posed by electronic art, but they may not know it. In other words, I think there is continuity between what we know as conservators and what objects and artists will demand of us going forward. I think we are prepared for this. The discipline and our grounding in terms of education, training, approaches, and understanding of issues of artists' intents and interpreting them—I think that is all really strong.

That confidence comes out of my photography-based training. Photography has not stood still in the course of my career; there is constant innovation. Artists are constantly ahead of our understanding of precise conservation prescriptions. There are probably 25 research projects that need to be done in photography conservation just to catch up to where artists

are today; and as soon as those 25 studies are done—if they are ever done—they will probably be obsolete, because artists will have moved on to something else entirely. You have to accept that and accept that things are moving fast and that we will always be a bit behind the preservation imperative posed by these objects. We have to get comfortable with that and rely on our instincts and our training as conservators. We, as a profession, are very well prepared to adapt to the demands of new media.

When you started out in the late 1990s, clearly there was a gap that needed to be filled. To the extent that you have been following along with this in the intervening time, can you talk about where you have seen the most progress made in the area of new media conservation? And related to that, where you see the most need for work still to be done?

Back in 2000 with SFMoMA, we put together a symposium called Tech Archeology. It helped us to move beyond the theory we were all discussing to look at concrete case studies. At the time, there weren't any concrete applications of theory out there. It was tiresome to go to conferences where people would talk about hypothetical situations. I thought that was something that really needed to change, so we put together case studies based on real works of art and on real artists. Often, the collector and the different stakeholders within the museum structure, such as registrars, were present as well. So we really catalyzed something unique at that time. It was really applied. Forget about the research. Forget about theory. It is important to get to work. That was encouraging.

Since that time, more and more, we are seeing that institutions that collect this material— such as SFMoMa, the Tate, and hopefully many others—get the expertise in-house and start to work on projects ... really working on real-world objects. It is so much more than theory; it's the accumulated wisdom gained from working on real works of art that is going to propel these issues forward. It is a move towards getting it off the blackboard and into conservation labs.

Could you talk about working with media art repositories, and any decisions that you made as a group on using repositories?

There is no real way to say this nicely; it was a little frustrating. Mona Jimenez received a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) to conduct a survey. The report dates to December 1997, and it was the Media Alliance that put it together, led by Mona. We went to media art repositories in New York State. Electronic Arts Intermix; Experimental Television Center; Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center; The Kitchen; the Syracuse University Art Video Program; the Everson Museum Collection; and Visual Studies Workshop. We went to these repositories and the premise of the survey—and this was Mona's genius really—was that for any sort of media-based preservation initiative to get funding and mainstream acceptance to propel them forward, they had to engage with the profession of conservation, one way or another. In other words, conservators bring

something to the table when it comes to preservation—which sounds like such an obvious statement, but conservators at that time were not engaged in these issues. Mona understood that to make progress and legitimize this as a field, she was going to have to get conservators interested. So she asked me to do the survey. We drove around New York State looking at these different collections and I tried to bring my understanding on how to manage a collection-based conservation survey and apply it to works of art that typically were ½ inch open reel videos, sometimes ¾ inch cassettes sitting on shelves—things that could not be easily accessed or seen.

So we did it, and I thought it was a very successful experiment but the frustrating part was that the documented need that came out of that was so vast, and maybe what we were trying to do was so new, that nothing really happened. We learned a lot and we brought that knowledge and experience back to into our work; and maybe over time, it has borne some fruit. But there wasn't any sort of palpable outcome for any of these institutions, which had important collections in desperate need. I think that is par for the course: for every 10 surveys, there might be one implementation plan, which is a real pity. This was a bit of a defeat.

As part of this survey, Mona and I hatched the Tech Archeology project that I referred to earlier, recognizing that we needed to have some concrete case studies and successes that we can point to, and some people who are willing to stand up and say, "I am a media arts conservator." I kept saying to Mona, "You're the first. You have to start coming to AIC meetings. Anyone can call themselves a conservator. There are certain things that you have to learn. You have to start hanging out with conservators and absorb some of our methodologies. You need to self-appoint yourself as the first one." Which she eventually did, in some ways. She still comes to AIC and she is still involved in Electronic Media Group [EMG] meetings. So that very frustrating but eye-opening experience provided a catalyst to get beyond surveys, assessments, and theory to practice that is more concrete.

Although progress has been made, there are still no formal media art conservation programs in the United States. Would you like to talk about your thoughts on that matter? What do you think the prospects are? What are the needs for that type of program?

I am of mixed feelings. I am probably not the person to talk to about it. First of all, I came out of the Buffalo art conservation training program that came from Cooperstown. That is a very traditional graduate school education. That is excellent preparation, frankly, for electronic media conservator. You are not going to learn it there; you won't learn applications there; they won't be able to provide you with projects there—just like they weren't able to provide me with photograph conservation projects when I was there. I learned paper, object, and painting conservation. It was a little frustrating at the time; I was interested in photography and there wasn't much. But, over the years, and almost right

away, I appreciated the thrust of the program—they taught you what they knew, and knew a lot about. They introduced you to a mode of thinking and behaving around art objects. I think that is probably the most important thing that any conservator can learn at the graduate level. There will be time for application-based training later on. Most of the programs in North America focus on one year of applied training and internships, but to get that grounding first has been for me the most valuable, whether [for] photography conservation or media art conservation. Once you are firmly grounded in the discipline, you can move forward.

If there is any deficit today, it would be application-based training. By that I mean that there are fellowship positions for photography and painting conservation and things like that, and there probably should be similar fellowships in media art conservation, where people who are interested in it can do some practical work in this area. But I don't think that I would re-engineer any of the existing [graduate] programs or engineer a new program with a single focus on media art conservation. I'm not sure I believe that that would be a good approach. At a certain point, I did believe in it; I thought it was a necessity. Now, I feel that having a more general practice understanding of the entire field is a valuable asset. Once you have the understanding and you have an interest in media art conservation, the issue is where you go to get the hands-on experience.

Are the technology challenges that you encounter in photography conservation similar to those of media art conservation?

The applicability is just by analogy. Since I am in private practice, a lot of my work has a resonance with the market. When I was first apprenticing in photography in the mid-80s, the focus was on Modernist black-and-white prints because those prints were what was being collected and what were increasing in value. Then in the mid-90s, color photography became much more valuable in the market and museums began to collect more aggressively in this area. As a result, the field shifted from looking at the needs of black-and-white photography to the needs of color photography. The next big transition is what is happening now, which is not so much a technological change as much as it is a format change. Photographers are printing much bigger and coming up with interesting mounting and display systems, whether it's giant light boxes for transmitted light or face-mounted systems where they adhere the photograph to a piece of Plexiglas backed by aluminum. These things can be the size of a wall. Couple that with question, is it a photograph? Well, someone still needs to deal with it. There are issues with the all sorts of digital inkjet printings that are coming into the studio.

The lesson is what I was talking about before, and this is where it is analogous to all electronic media: you have to come to grips with the constant evolution, and not be intimidated by it. Just accept it as part of your identity as a conservator. That is the exciting

piece of all this. I would hate to be in a profession where everything is prescribed and locked down, and you learn it all in graduate school.

Take for example removing varnish off the surface an oil painting. There isn't one standard approach. Even there, the techniques are constantly being developed and improved. It might not be evolving quite as quickly as other media, but it is definitely evolving. So the thing is to be comfortable with ambiguity. Be comfortable with not knowing. And be grateful for it. That doesn't mean embracing ignorance, but it means relying on your knowledge base as a conservator—what you understand to be the best course of ethical conservation treatment.

I know that is vague and open-ended, but that is the appeal. Still, when I go to an Electronic Media Group meeting at AIC, it's the most dynamic group by far. I don't think it has to do with the media or that it is new. It is because this Group is engaged in problem-solving on a much more frequent basis, and that is exciting.

You mentioned that the sharing of case studies has resulted in a lot of accumulated wisdom. Where is that wisdom accumulated? Could you point out a few institutions, resources, or places that you would consider the best places to go for best practices, guidelines, or state-of-the-art thinking about time-based media art conservation?

The Electronic Media Group of AIC has a great website. There is a lot of material up there; of course, it could always be better, there could be a lot more. But these are the people that are doing it. Another bias of mine—and I learned this early on—is that I believe there is a distinction between media art conservators [and others who manage these media in other contexts]. You are charged with working with works of art, as opposed to someone who would be dealing with media issues within an archive or a library. I think it really matters whether you are dealing with information or whether you are dealing with art.

On the art side, there is so much that we need to learn from the archives and library side, because that side has been extremely active—I think of AMIA and other groups—in thinking about standards, best practices, and guidelines, all of that. In many cases when dealing with art, there are things we can borrow from that world. But again, [as an art conservator,] you have to get used to dealing with ambiguity. An instance of that is meeting a work of art on its own terms, which in many cases militates against the adoption of best practices and standards. There are some [guidelines] that you can apply—for example, Matters in Media Art has a work flow for accessioning a work of art, and some guidelines for sharing a work of art. That is great, and it represents progress. However, when it comes to treatment and interpretation over long periods of time—in other words, conservation of an electronic-based work of art—I am not convinced that a standards-based approach will help us that much.

There is analogy that can be drawn with photography conservation practice. A photograph, depending on its context, can be considered purely visual information. It could be just an image, and that's all it is, that's all it is worth. Or it could be a fine art print, which is a tangible connection to its point of creation—a tangible connection, through materials, to the artist. For dealing with [a photograph that is just] information, whether in a library or an archive, you have certain standards of practice. There, you can really start to break down the world into broad categories and apply a rules-based systems based on categories. But when it is a work of art and it has this connection through time to an artist, we wouldn't want to apply those rules necessarily.

Do you think there is room to apply guidelines to specific components within the work of art? I am thinking of computer code-based works, for example. There might be general guidelines for caring for parts of a work. At what point does each work need individual attention?

There is a constant give-and-take around that issue. There is a need to strike the right balance, which is at the heart of the professional challenge for anyone who would dare to become a media art conservator within a fine arts institution. For code-based work, as an example, I have a suspicion that once you start to codify and standardize around certain coding languages, there are going to be other artworks that will defy it and make you rethink everything. Rethinking isn't a bad thing; it is at the heart of the matter.

On one hand, we are trying to come up with preservation systems—a portfolio of practices—to do the most good for the most objects. But that will be defied by individual objects that will be coming in on a fairly consistent basis. Managing that is the new reality. If you signed up to take a bunch of rules and live by those rules all the time, this is probably the wrong profession for you. But if you signed up to take some broad guidelines and approaches that will do the most good for the most objects, and then be intelligent and flexible enough to know when those guidelines are irrelevant and need to be reworked…

You need to know when the [standard] approaches won't work. You need to know that if they are applied to this particular work of art, it will simply die. You need to know when to put the rules aside and meet the artwork on its own terms. That is the tricky balance and, it's where conservators are agile and quick on their feet.

Do you think it is valuable to continue to share case studies and publish that information?

Yes, I definitely do. And that is where EMG is doing a great job. I'll admit, I never thought an EMG journal or paper-based publication was of any value—this is an electronic media group after all. Put it up online! I anticipated that we would be recording all of our talks, and would have a big library by now of all our talks. That never happened, and that is a pity. So to build a permanent literature, EMG decided to publish a journal, through the work of Jeffery Warda and others. The EMG journal is an excellent resource and I hope it

continues. It's 100% volunteer-based, and it is a tremendous amount of work for a dedicated group of volunteers. That is its only weakness. If it is scaled up over the next 10-15 years, it will become a major resource to document this field at this formative stage. So not only is it relevant immediately—it goes into immediate use—but looking ahead, in 25 years' time, people are going to have this amazing primary source for the field of [media art] conservation dealing with this historic transition.

Have you seen any aspects of photography that lend themselves to standards?

Yes, most definitely. Here is an example: we, as a profession, came to grips with the fact that film-based materials were not stable at ambient room conditions. Even more so for color film that was made after World War II. It just wasn't working; that preservation system was broken. Now, if you are collecting that material, you know that you must install cold or cool storage. That kind of research had a substantial impact. That strategy doesn't just apply to a single photograph—it applies to classes of photographic material that encompasses thousands of objects, potentially, within an institution. If you were to tell me it was a specific type of print, let's say a chromogenic print, I will know—probably without looking at it—that it should go into cold storage. I would know that it has intrinsic vulnerabilities that only cold storage can manage. That is a rule-based system, and it will do a lot of good for a lot of objects.

But that same chromogenic print might have mounting issues; maybe it is face-mounted or back-mounted in a certain way. And we may want to look at it more closely to evaluate the best medium-term and long-term strategies for it, as the mounts may react negatively to low temperatures. This comes back to this idea of being comfortable with ambiguity; you have to make decisions as a conservator after weighing all these factors. Knowing the crucial piece of information [that tells you] how this object in front of you is going to behave [may be] an unknown.

That is the analogy in many cases with electronic-based artworks. We have systems for characterizing it, for documenting it, for doing the artist interview that comes along with it, for doing the exhibition history research, in terms of how it was installed over the course of its life. We have all of that kind of archival stuff, and we demand all of that upon acquisition for the file. That is our system. But we also have to ask, how do we keep this piece an authentic connection to the moment of creation and to the artist? How do we ensure it will be authentic for people looking at it 20, 25, or 50 years from now? That is where systems start to break down, and you become reliant on the decision-making process of individual conservators working outside of prescriptive systems, but as part of the larger discipline.

Any last thoughts?

I think what you are doing is great. The more people that talk and think about this, the more we will have smart people engaged in the field, and that bodes well for the future. So, good luck with the project. Get it out there; disseminate it as widely as you can; talk about it, present about it.

That's the thing: just say what you are doing. It doesn't have to be this big, complex, "change-the-world" thing—just say what you are doing. Someone else is going to face a similar issue or have a similar problem, and that someone can benefit tremendously from knowing what you did, how you approached it, and how you thought about it. That is how we are going to build up a conservation field around these issues. Theory only gets you so far; it's practice. Maybe because I am a treatment conservator, I truly believe that conservation is an active profession where doing stuff is really what we are about.