

# Re-collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory

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by Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2014.

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Artists working in digital media regularly face the dilemma of obsolescence, but the problem of preservation concerns all types of new and experimental media, as they are all to a certain extent time-based. To make this point, the authors of **Re-collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory** begin by comparing the fate of Eva Hesse's experimental sculpture *Expanded Expansion* (1969) with her friend Sol Lewitt's wall drawings. Lewitt's work would have been more ephemeral than Hesse's if he hadn't happened on to an elegant preservation solution that dovetailed with his artistic program. Instead of making the drawings himself, he gave instructions for others to follow, accompanied by diagrams that served as scores for future interpretations. Hesse, on the other hand, experimented with new materials such as rubberized cheesecloth and polyester resin in her sculptures. When she died in 1970 these materials hadn't yet time to become opaque and brittle. Today *Expanded Expansion* languishes in a warehouse, a ghost of its former self, while Sol Lewitt's wall drawings continue to be realized by gallery assistants the world over.

**Re-collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory** uses examples from new media art to support the larger claim that "the historical record of our era will be irretrievable without a drastic change in the technologies, institutions, and laws that now govern cultural preservation." Today, works in analog media like film and video are routinely restored and digitized. Even work uploaded to the cloud lives in vulnerable data centers. The authors describe "a *variable media* approach to rescuing new media, distributed across producers and consumers who can choose appropriate strategies for each endangered work."

Logically organized, the book is written in a conversational tone that maintains the energy of oral speech. General readers will find it clear and to the point, with examples drawn from the authors' extensive experience as museum professionals. Some of the appeal to popular taste could have been a bit ham-handed were it not so "over the top". An obvious example is the overarching whodunit analogy: the victim is our cultural artifacts, the authors latter-day Sherlock Holmeses making the case against each of the possible culprits present at the scene of the crime. Death by technology, death by institution, death by law. Within each main section, three chapters detail effects, causes and possible solutions. Each chapter is signed by one of the authors, while the other intervenes occasionally in the margin to add an example, or to disagree. This gives the book the tone and feel not so much of Holmes interpreting evidence for

Dr. Watson's benefit as of the two authors sparring in panel discussions at the academic conferences cited in the notes.

Death by technology, the most visible culprit, has as its antidote technology in the shape of variability and metadata. Variability is perhaps the most telling difference between works made with digital "allographic" media, reproductions for which there is no original, but rather a large number of variations, and works in "autographic" media like paint. Metadata is descriptive information, such as that used by libraries, situating the artwork in a particular context. To gather useful metadata about works in new media the authors have developed a "variable media questionnaire".

Death by institution comes when museums apply to new media works preservation techniques adapted for older media. These can be as innocuous as wall labels written by over-zealous assistants which, while ostensibly describing works, force them into ill-fitting models. It's reductive to assign only one author and date to new media works born from collaboration and gradually built up in multiple versions over long periods of time. Rinehart offers an "institutional" antidote in the shape of the Media Art Notation system which charts (fine-slices) collaborative processes involving plural authors and outcomes.

Death by law comes through economic models developed for mass media, in which licensing and copyright restrictions create legal obstacles to access. The book develops the idea, gleaned from artificial life research, of proliferation as preservation, and the critical role of so-called amateurs in digital conservation.

This book gives an excellent overview of the situation and proposes solutions based on the idea that new media works can become to a certain extent media-independent thanks to the variable media approach. If the artist's intentions are respected, these works can be preserved, for example, by being recreated in newer media that vary over time. This reviewer's main regret is the absence of a bibliography and references to sister projects like the European ELMCIP database of electronic literature.