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A Shared Responsibility: Caring for Time-Based Artworks and the MOMA experience

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ABSTRACT

Since its inception, the Art Gallery of New South Wales has demonstrated a deep commitment to collecting the art of its day. This commitment to supporting contemporary art and artists is attested to by its appointment of a dedicated contemporary art curator in 1979 – the first Australian institution to do so. With time-based art asserting itself as a fundamental and dynamic part of contemporary art practice, it is no surprise that for the past five decades the Gallery has collected and displayed works by a number of leading artists working across such media. It was in the early 1970s that the Gallery first started to collect time-based art with the acquisition of several works by Australian artists, namely experimental film and video documentation of performance as well as early explorations into sound and kinetic sculpture. At the time, these artists – now amongst Australia’s most important – were only just beginning to explore new technologies and international movements, such as performance, video and conceptual art. Major purchases of installations with kinetic elements marked time-based art acquisitions through the 1990s and 2000s, with time-based art acquisitions having increased significantly over the last five years. This reflects an increasing institutional ambition towards the collection and display of time-based artworks, with each work demanding an exceptional level of technical expertise, infrastructural capability, gallery space and even audience management. In recognition of the significant art historical, cultural and financial value of its time-based artworks, the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW) has worked over the past five years to become better equipped to manage issues unique to collecting, preserving, storing and displaying artworks in the collection. This process has really gained momentum over the past 18 months, with private benefaction supporting the appointment of a time-based art conservator who has worked with a time-based art project team encompassing staff from a range of departments across the Gallery.

As a testament to the collection management developments within this area, in 2017 a curatorial and conservation team from The Art Gallery of New South Wales was chosen to participate in an international workshop run by The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the Andrew Mellon Foundation, which centred around the international establishment of the specialisation of time-based art conservation. The larger aim of this workshop was to create a collaborative research environment that could illicit fundamental change, by enabling institutions from around the world to

come together to develop a cohesive worldwide strategy to preserve and maintain time-based artworks.

It is widely acknowledged that MoMA has established effective, responsive and thoughtful processes that manage the physical, digital and conceptual elements of a time-based artwork over its life span, as well as setting important precedents for how time-based artworks should be managed across an entire institution to ensure best practice at all stages of collection management, now and into the future. While in recent times there has been a shift in thinking and a tangible momentum from conservation professionals working towards addressing the needs of Australian time-based art collections, much remains to be done to ensure this progress can be both consolidated and built upon to bring about lasting, comprehensive change at a national level. It is possible that Australian institutions have fallen behind in participating in the development and specialisation of time-based art conservation, which can be, in part, attributed to geographical isolation. While Australian conservation and curatorial departments have been working independently to develop policies, procedures and programs for time-based art, these efforts are not moving quickly enough to meaningfully reduce the risk of losing important twentieth and twenty-first century time-based artworks. Australian institutions are approaching the precipice of a breakthrough in regard to the way we embrace and manage our time-based art collections. In order to establish clear standards and practices for the care and conservation of time-based art, it is essential to collaborate with our international counterparts, as building a specialisation without precedent or international support can be a daunting challenge. For AGNSW, the MoMA workshop has highlighted the need for Australian cultural institutions to invest time and resources in working together with our international colleagues to facilitate a fundamental shift in both thinking and practice towards contemporary art collection management, that can be applied to cultural institutions across Australia.

BIOGRAPHY

Asti Sherring is the time-based art conservator at The Art Gallery of New South Wales, a position which began in 2015. Asti completed a Bachelor of Media Arts with honours from Sydney University in 2005. She completed a Post-Graduate Certificate in photographs conservation (Melbourne University) in 2011 and a Masters of Materials Conservation specialising in paper and photographic materials in 2012. Asti undertook a photographs conservation fellowship at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2014. In 2016 Asti was awarded The Grollo Ruzzene Foundation travel fellowship in conservation. In 2017 Asti began postgraduate research in the form of a PhD at the University of Canberra.