



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL MATERIAL INC.

The Shock of the New: Modern Materials, Media and Methods Joint Objects and Electron SIG Symposium February 8 to 10 2017 - Melbourne Museum

Abstract

Title:

Tending the archive: ritual as preservation; enfolding preservation into use; and preservation as a community enabler through the case study of '(Wo)Man With Mirror', a re-enactment of a 1970s artwork.

Name of Presenter:

Louise Curham

Affiliations:

Centre for Creative & Cultural Research, University of Canberra

Abstract:

My PhD draws on my background in archives, audiovisual preservation and art. My research explores passing on a work of live art from the 1970s using re-enactment. It explores body-to-body transmission in keeping things from the past alive.

For the past decade I have re-enacted several works of British expanded cinema with artist Lucas Ihlein and in our artist group Teaching and Learning Cinema (TLC). We aim to follow the rules and rigours of the originals but we view our re-enactments as artworks in their own right, emerging from the points where we find we must diverge from the originals.

My research explores TLC's recent work passing on one of our re-enactments to another artist. In 2009, TLC produced a 'user's manual' for (Wo)Man With Mirror, our re-enactment of British artist Guy Sherwin's Man With Mirror. Last year we worked with artist Laura Hindmarsh as she deployed the user's manual to produce her own piece, Woman with Man With Mirror. To do this, Laura needed not just the manual but also tuition from us in person. In this talk I will discuss three ideas from this research.

1. Ritual as preservation

Since the early '90s, performance studies scholars have discussed whether it is in the nature of performance to disappear or to remain. I take up Rebecca Schneider's idea that a performance can be a record. Her specific instances are rituals like the liturgy, where the performance of that liturgy becomes the record of that ritual practice. This turns on its head the archivist's notion that the record is the trace of the performance (Schneider, 2011).

2. Enfolding preservation into use

While it is not new to conservators that using things can help look after them (Smith, 2007 for example), this case study extends this as a 'preservation of doing.' By this I mean we preserve and use at the same time. As Teaching and Learning Cinema has gone about its work on (Wo)Man With Mirror, we have produced new artworks, which also help to preserve Guy's original. For example, the user's manual documents both the context of the original and provides instructions for others about

how to make it and Laura's experience will result in a new edition of the manual, useful for preservation. Yet the new edition of the manual and Laura's new work are themselves artworks. So we entwine preservation into use and it is through use that we gain insight into what is needed to keep the work alive for the next user.

3. Preservation as a community enabler

Built into TLC's approach is transmission from one person to another, body-to-body transmission. TLC learnt *Man With Mirror* from Guy, Laura in turn learnt from us. This process forms a community interested in the well-being of this work, come together to do this meaningful work of caring for something we think is important. While the model of the participatory museum and the shift from collections being about something to being for someone (Weil, 1999) is well understood, the work of preservation, for the most part, remains the domain of specialists within institutions. That there are just not enough conservators to go round is also understood (Sloggett, 2016). So encouraging and empowering communities to do their own caring, on this grass-roots level of communities of interest has potential.

References

- Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains : Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. London: Routledge, 2011, pp 90; 105.
- Sloggett, Robyn. 'A National Conservation Policy for a New Millennium—building Opportunity, Extending Capacity and Securing Integration in Cultural Materials Conservation.' *Bulletin of the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials* 36, no. 2 (2016): 79–87.
- Smith, Abby. 'Valuing Preservation'. *Library Trends* 56, no. 1 (2007): 4–25.
- Weil, Stephen. 'From Being about Something to Being for Somebody, the Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum.' First published 1999. In *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, 2nd edition., 170–90. United Kingdom: Altamira Press, 2012.

Brief Biography of the Author(s):

Louise Curham is an experimental filmmaker and archivist. On leave from the National Archives of Australia in Canberra, she is doing a PhD that draws on her work as a member of the Teaching and Learning Cinema collective. Louise is a member of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research at the University of Canberra.

E-mail contact

Louise.curham@canberra.edu.au