

Something Old, Something New: Born-digital Artist's Materials in the Archive and the Studio

Summary

One of the most important skills any conservator can possess, is an intimate knowledge of the materials that artists employ in their studios, and an empathetic understanding of the artistic process. This elusive state of connoisseurship requires not only years of technical training, but hands-on experience in doing. However, when surveying the broader field of Time-Based Media Conservation, it is clear that this kind of material connoisseurship is still nascent. Training programs where archivists and conservators learn the ways and processes of some Time-Based Media artists are still developing. Small Data Industries, a consultancy and conservation studio specializing in time-based media art, offers clients an in-depth level of understanding of complex born-digital artistic materials and processes being acquired today. The aim of this project is to train the resident with this much needed expertise by immersing them in two parallel project streams.

First: The National Digital Stewardship Resident will lead efforts on the inventory and stabilization of obsolete born-digital materials in two highly at-risk archives: 1) the personal archives of composer and computer music pioneer Laurie Spiegel, and 2) the archives of non profit artist residency program Eyebeam. Both of these archives contain large amounts of obsolete digital media carriers (floppy disks of varying sizes and formats, optical media, Zip disks, Syquest, various shapes and sizes of hard drives, and more). This work will provide them with key training in the handling and recovery of obsolete media carriers, as well as digital forensics techniques.

Second: As a way to immerse the resident in contemporary artistic materials and practice, they will help us in our conservation service and support offering to artists, galleries, and collectors. This work will provide the resident with an in-depth understanding of the materials used today by contemporary artists, the processes by which works are effectively prepared for the collection, as well as the conservation issues that arise after the works have been collected. They will gain an insider's perspective on studio practice, and the needs and behaviours of galleries and collectors.

By immersing the resident in these two different initiatives, they will gain a hands-on connoisseurship of contemporary time-based media art materials, illuminated and enhanced by experience in handling at-risk and obsolete archival materials. This hybrid project will provide the resident with practical skills and experience applicable not only to working within an institutional context, but also within the broader ecosystem of the art world.

Specific Objectives

Goal 1: Market analysis of the studio/gallery/collector/archive ecosystem

Objective: The resident will analyze Small Data's own processes, and discover where there are needs for new forms of service and support to bolster the ecosystem. Our support model is already in place but we would benefit greatly from a concentrated period of work to interview more clients and stakeholders, so that we can understand their needs on a deeper level.

Goal 2: Produce work plans for inventorying the archives of Laurie Spiegel and Eyebeam

Objective: The resident will be asked to produce a comprehensive work plan for their inventory work. This process will help the resident anticipate and manage the numerous challenges entailed in inventorying heterogeneous obsolete media carriers.

Goal 3: Produce inventories for the archives of Laurie Spiegel and Eyebeam

Objective: The resident will produce comprehensive inventories of the at-risk obsolete digital media carriers in these two archives. These inventories will serve as an effective strategy and

planning tool for the work to recover and stabilize these carriers.

Goal 4: Produce a materials-focused report on the studio practices of Time-Based Media Artists
Objective: As part of their work to support Small Data Industries' conservation service and support model for artists, galleries, and collectors, the resident will be immersing themselves deeply in the studio practices of time-based media artists. Documenting their findings from this process will serve an invaluable role in helping bolster the material understanding of Time-Based Media Art in the broader field. This report will feed directly into the final project report.

Goal 5: Stabilize at-risk digital media in the archives of Laurie Spiegel and Eyebeam
Objective: Using their previously produced inventories as a guide, the resident will lead the recovery and stabilization process of the at-risk obsolete digital media carriers.

Goal 6: Document the analysis and work in a final report
Objective: The resident will document the culminations of their project learnings in the form of a final report. This report will provide insights into contemporary and historic artistic practices in Time-Based Media Art (drawing from their work with contemporary artists, as well as the Spiegel and Eyebeam archives), an overview of the studio/gallery/collector ecosystem and the how and when conservation services fit in. The report will be a useful guide not only for others interested in offering such services, but also for the stakeholders (artists, galleries, collectors) receiving these services. The report will also draw from the lessons learned from stabilizing the Laurie Spiegel and Eyebeam archives, illustrating lessons learned in handling contemporary and legacy artist materials, and making sustainability recommendations for the Spiegel and Eyebeam archives that would apply to archives in similar challenging contexts.

Timeframe & Deliverables

Deliverable #1 due October 2018
Market analysis of the studio/gallery/collector/archive ecosystem

Deliverable #2 due November 2018
Work plan for inventorying the archives of Laurie Spiegel and Eyebeam

Deliverable #3 due March 2019
Inventories for the archives of Laurie Spiegel and Eyebeam

Deliverable #4 due April 2019
Contemporary studio practice report complete

Deliverable #5 due June 2019
Stabilization of at-risk digital media carriers in the Laurie Spiegel and Eyebeam archives

Deliverable #6 due July 2019
Final report

Context

Until the establishment of Small Data Industries in February of 2017, there had been only one private practice conservation studio in the USA specializing in Time-Based Media Art. Most expertise in this developing field lives either within the walls of institutions, or in the minds of highly specialized technicians and engineers from allied fields. The repercussions of this are numerous – collectors and small institutions unable to hire Time-Based Media Conservators cannot find the support they need in the vendor ecosystem; galleries find themselves having to take on these responsibilities themselves and hope for the best; and artists often find themselves bearing the brunt of the burden when it comes to the repair, maintenance, and care of their artworks that live within private collections. If this imbalance in the ecosystem were to remain, it would in all likelihood stunt the growth of time-based media art in the commercial art market, which in turn impacts the overall economy and job market for emerging professionals interested in working in the field of Time-Based Media Conservation. Small Data Industries was established to help bootstrap this ecosystem, by creating a private conservation practice and consulting service focused on Time-Based Media Art, with a la carte services. We are not only working with private

collectors, galleries, and artists to provide service oriented engagements, but also lending our expertise to institutions in the form of a few very long-term institutional growth and change initiatives.

The opportunity to host a National Digital Stewardship Resident comes at a critical time in Small Data Industries' growth and evolution. Our small team is growing quickly in order to meet demand, and the services and support that the resident will be dedicated to will have been in operation for over a year upon their arrival. This will be an opportune moment to reflect upon our service model, and offer pro-bono work with these at-risk collections, to see how we can grow and improve these initiatives. As well, the platform of the NDSR Art program, and its public sharing and reporting that it encourages, will provide Small Data Industries and our resident with a way of publicly sharing the inner workings of our business and service offerings. Our hope is that by doing so, we can accomplish two things: first, share new ways of working with our institutional counterparts, and second, provide inspiration for other emerging professionals to consider private practice, thus further bolstering the ecosystem. Ultimately, as stated in the Summary, our overall project goal is to train an emerging professional in the art of born-digital material connoisseurship. While of course the resident's work will greatly aid the work done at Small Data Industries, our hope is that it can fundamentally serve as a way for us to give back to the broader community of stakeholders in the field of Time-Based Media Conservation.

Required Resources

Small Data Industries will provide a workspace and support to the resident in our Brooklyn based lab. The resident will be provided with desktop computer and/or laptop computer when needed, and full access to our suite of lab and in-the-field tools and equipment. The resident will be provided with an ID card for 24/7 swipe access to our secure facility. Most importantly, the resident will be provided with an open environment for questioning and research.

Required Knowledge & Skills

- Graduate degree in Library and/or Information Science, Information Technologies, Art Conservation, or equivalent from an accredited institution
- Knowledge of art history
- Knowledge of digital preservation principles and standards
- Self-starter with entrepreneurial ambition
- Ability to work independently and as part of a team
- Excellent verbal, written, and interpersonal communication skills
- Demonstrable organizational, analytical, and problem solving skills
- High level of proficiency with computers and an aptitude for learning new technologies

Preferred Knowledge or Experience

- Masters or undergraduate degree in art history or fine arts
- Experience working in archives or museums
- Knowledge of emerging trends in digital preservation
- Familiarity with digital forensics tools and concepts
- Comfort in working with obsolete hardware and software