

WRITING THE HISTORY OF THE FUTURE: ZKM AND THE CULTURAL WORK OF MEDIA ART CONSERVATION

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Abstract

Media Art, notwithstanding its popularity and the growth of use of technological media in contemporary art, remains an art form that is marginalised within institutional collections. The obsolescence and withdrawal of technological media from the market, as well as the obsolescence of software and hardware, represent significant challenges for institutions. A further complication is evident in the fact that, from the 1960s onwards, Western art underwent a shift in focus from the object to its performativity or subject. A comparable transition was observed in the domain of conservation theory, wherein the paradigm underwent a shift from a material-based approach to one that prioritises subjects over objects. However, the art market and institutional art systems demonstrated a limited capacity to embrace these shifts in the domain of collecting. This thesis investigates the primary challenges that arise when media art is integrated into institutional contexts, focusing on the conceptual and theoretical transformations necessary within both institutional practices and the wider field of art theory. Its objective is to contribute to the development of strategies that enable the meaningful incorporation of technologically mediated artworks not only into museum collections but also into the broader framework of collective cultural memory. This analysis is conducted through a detailed examination of the institutional practices of the ZKM (Center for Art and Media) in Karlsruhe. The institution is renowned for its pioneering work in the field of media art preservation, as well as for housing one of the most extensive and diverse collections of media art. This encompasses a review of the institution's ideological frameworks (for instance, the media archaeological approach) and structural influences. Utilising an interdisciplinary approach, the research integrates historical and theoretical analysis with insights derived from interviews conducted with prominent ZKM staff and artists. The thesis incorporates discourse and conceptual analysis, particularly around the following themes: interactivity, variability, authenticity, temporality, performativity of the art object, media archaeology and the myths of ephemerality and innovations that have influenced the institutionalisation of media art.