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Project Acronym: SOMEART

Scientist in Charge: Professor Elizabeth B Silva, The Open University

Fellow: Dr Fernando Dominguez Rubio, The Open University

Period: 01 July 2010 to 30 June 2013

SOMEART

Final Report to REA

1. FINAL PUBLISHABLE SUMMARY REPORT:

Overview, conclusions and socio-economic impacts of the project

The aim of this project was to conduct an ethnographic study of media-art conservation practices at the Museum of Modern Art of New York (MoMA). Unlike more traditional artworks, like paintings and sculptures, media-art works consist of a complex assemblage of materials, including storage devices (i.e. DVDs, slide films, videocassettes) and playback equipment (i.e. slide projectors, sound equipment, film loops, monitors), which defy traditional conservation methods and demand radically new conservation guidelines and decision-taking models.

As planned, through an ethnographic engagement with the backstage of MoMA, this project has explored the complex ensemble of actors, practices, infrastructures and technologies that are being implemented to preserve this increasingly important, but highly fragile, part of our contemporary cultural heritage. With its detailed ethnographic study, this investigation provides a much-needed insight into the operations, behind the scenes, of contemporary art museums, and sheds empirical light on the material, social and technological dimensions whereby contemporary culture is being preserved and reproduced over time.

By identifying how the conservation of media-art works is perceived by various agents and how decisions are made in practice, this project has been able to determine the implications that the emergence of this media-based art is having in contemporary art museums as well as some of its wider social, cultural and economic impacts. One of the main findings of the project is to show how the instability of media-artworks is giving way to the institutionalization of new boundaries and decision-taking processes within the museums. The growing number of contemporary artworks that are fragile and obsolescent are bringing about a new relational space in which interdisciplinary, rather than medium specialization, becomes the internal organizing logic of the conservation field, and where the ability to collaborate comes to define one's own position and relative power within the field. Those conservators who can collaborate and work across conservation boundaries and varied artistic mediums are better positioned than those traditionally trained in one single medium. The wider effects of these new dynamics reach beyond conservation. The need to collaborate to acquire, display and maintain increasingly

obsolescent and rapidly changing artworks is forcing contemporary art museums to create new interdisciplinary spaces and practices that are blurring the boundaries traditionally separating conservators, curators and artists and fuelling new dynamics of 'position-taking' and struggles. At MoMA this process has crystallized in the creation of the Media Working Group, a new interdisciplinary group composed of curators, conservators, archivists, and audiovisual experts who collectively deal with decisions concerning the acquisition, display and preservation of media artworks. The creation of this group constitutes a significant departure from the traditionally hierarchical ways in which the museum has both organized and produced knowledge and meaning about its artworks.

The intrinsic obsolescence of media-based artworks means that every attempt to upgrade them into a newer technology will be eventually superseded by the development of newer technologies. At the same time, failing to upgrade them would be tantamount to condemning these artworks to death, as the technologies upon which they rely are rapidly becoming irretrievable. The ongoing process of migration to which these artworks are subjected not only implies a constant change in their physical containers (e.g. their display technologies) but also a change in their artistic content. This project has also found that the process through which media artworks can become 'museum objects' is a true process of co-production in which creative and productive agency is not monopolized by the artist but is distributed among different agents. Curators, registrars, conservators and audiovisual technicians are not simply in charge of presenting an artwork that existed beforehand, but actively shaped the final aesthetic of this artwork. In sum, the inherent obsolescence of contemporary artworks, like installations and performance, and the difficulty of placing them into stable 'object-positions' forces new dynamics of collaboration and co-production that challenge the traditional position of the museum within the field of contemporary art. Faced with these artworks, the task of the museum cannot be merely reduced to representing an already existing and more or less stable artwork, but also needs to include the co-production of the boundaries of the artwork: its material constituents, the ways in which it can be displayed, the degree to which materials can be changed and how that change can take place. However, this new role creates fresh conflicts in the field of art, as the museum comes to compete with artists, critics, galleries and artists' estates, who all potentially claim ownership over the definition and interpretation of the artwork. Another important finding of this research is to show how the emergence of media-based art is making possible a new system of alliances between museums, one which is reshaping the balance of power in the art market by enabling museums to re-enter the competition to acquire new and

valuable media artworks. This new set of alliances, based on new acquisition practices, like co-ownership, is taking place predominantly at the level of local-regional alliances and is circumscribed for the most part to the specific niche of media-based art. The result of this process is a new geography of institutional alliances around media-artworks that is redefining the spatial configuration of the contemporary art field as well as power positions within it.

2. METHODOLOGY

To conduct this research at MoMA, a qualitative approach was employed, informed by ethnographic methods—participant observation and semi-structured interviews—as well as by secondary data analysis based on an extensive bibliographical and historiographical research. This fieldwork study was conducted by Dr Fernando Rubio Dominguez, under supervision of Professor Elizabeth Silva, from the Open University, Professor Harvey Mollotch, from New York University and the on-site close guidance of Dr Glen Wharton, from MoMA’s media art conservation laboratory.

To briefly elaborate on each of these research methods and techniques, the account in this report will follow the narrative of Dr Dominguez:

a) Participant Observation: Between July 2010 and July 2012, I conducted participant observation at various sites within MoMA exploring the backstage life of the museum. This exploration included the observation of different activities within the museum, like the conservation of artworks; the design and installation of different exhibitions; the different processes involved in the acquisition, cataloguing and displaying of art, as well as the different activities outside the main building on 53rd street, involved with the archiving and storing of art in the museum’s storage facilities in Queens and in New Jersey. I accompanied museum staff in research visits to artist’s studios and conservation labs; and attended talks and workshops organized in New York City by MoMA. During this period, I also conducted active and full participant observation collaborating with the department of media conservation in various projects including, for example, the creation of a digitization plan for MoMA’s video and media-based collection; the elaboration of a proposal for managing rights in the acquisition of digital artworks; and a proposal to establish new guidelines for artists’ interviews and questionnaires. Additionally, between January and April 2011, I worked in MoMA’s conservation department as an intern, what allowed me to fully immerse in the daily life of the museum, attending artists’ interviews, developing hands-on conservation projects for a number of media-based artworks,

working on a daily basis with registrars, curators, scientists, and preparators, and actively participating in different inter-departmental research groups.

b) Semi-Structured Interviews: Between July 2010 and July 2012, I conducted 35 formal semi-structured interviews with different museum staff members including, for example, the museum's director; several chief and assistant curators; conservators; scientists; preparators; registrars; exhibition designers; architects; educators; or climate engineers. In addition to these formal interviews, I also conducted 10 informal interviews with different staff members. These interviews have been critical to capture the discourses of the different agents involved in the sites and processes I observed during my participant observation.

c) Bibliographical and historiographical research: Since July 2010, I have conducted an extensive bibliographical research exploring the institutional history of the museum, as well as its exhibition history and architectural evolution. This research was crucial to design the empirical framework of the investigation and to add historical depth to the first-hand data collected in the participant observation phase of this project. This bibliographical and historiographical research has been based on the critical reading of published scholarly work on MoMA's history, as well as on an extensive review of exhibition catalogues published by the Museum and press articles on these exhibitions.

The combination of these methods and techniques has allowed me to gather a wealth of first-hand empirical data, providing the empirical basis of the book and which will serve to shed a new light into the backstage life the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as an exemplar of wider changes in the practices and processes of contemporary art conservation on a wider scale.

3. OVERVIEW OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND DISSEMINATION

Over the last three years, the goals laid out in the original *Work Plan* were successfully achieved and some activities exceeded those originally planned. The original *Work Plan* included the development of the investigation as outlined above, which was fully accomplished and also the dissemination of the research. This is the aspect where the work plan most excelled, propelled by the sounding research process undertaken. Research findings were presented and discussed at 11 international conferences and workshops (see these listed below). Additionally, the *Work Plan* also contemplated the writing and submission of scientific articles, one edited volume, and the

organization of an international workshop. All these objectives have been met. Two scientific articles have been submitted, one is under review while a second written together with Prof. Elizabeth Silva was published during the life of the award (see Publications section below). Prof. Elizabeth Silva and Dr Dominguez successfully bid for funding to organize an international end of award workshop. The workshop, entitled *The Infrastructures of Digital Culture*, was successfully held on the 24th of June 2012 in London at The Open University, involving 25 invited participants from England, Scotland, France, Spain and the United States, including academics and cultural sector practitioners. A copy of the abstract and of the final program of the workshop is included below in this report. One of the outcomes of this workshop will be an edited volume to be published in the CRES Routledge series 'Culture, Economy and the Social' (more details on the *Publications* section, below). In addition to the original goals, Dr Dominguez has also secured a contract with the University of Chicago Press to publish a monograph based on his research at MoMA.

Detailed list of the different activities undertaken during the award:

a) Invited Presentations:

2013 "Art, and Ecologies without Nature". *Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura*. Madrid, June.

2013 "Why are there no art objects in the North Pole?" *Architectural Institute*. Prague, April

2012 "On the Material Ecologies of Contemporary Culture and The Challenge of New Media at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). *University College London*, October

2011 "Object-trajectories, judgment and boundary drawing in the field of contemporary art". *University of York*, June (with Prof Elizabeth Silva)

b) Conference papers

2013 "Co-Production at MoMA". *College of Arts Association Conference*. New York. February.

2012 "Partial Possessions and the evanescent materiality of media-art". *Social Studies of Science Conference*. Copenhagen, November.

2012 "Partial Possessions and objecthood in contemporary art". *The Lives of Property* Workshop. Oxford, September.

2012 "On the political promise of architectural prototypes and socio-technical experiments". CRES. Manchester, September.

2012 "Docile and Reticent Objects: The Institutional Dynamics of Permanence and Change at the Museum of MoMA". *American Sociological Association*. Denver, August.

2011 “Reticent Objects, Boundaries, and Field Dynamics at Museum of Modern Art of New York (MoMA)”. *European Sociological Association*. Geneva, September.

2011 “The Material Ecologies of Cultural Digital Heritage: the case of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)”. *European Sociological Association*. Geneva, September.

2010 “Media-art and the future of cultural objects in the digital age”. *International Sociological Association Conference*. Stockholm, June.

c) Organization of International Workshop (with Prof Elizabeth Silva):

2013 *The Infrastructures of Digital Culture*. London. The Open University, June. (programme appended below).

d) Publications:

- Book:

(Under Contract) Domínguez Rubio, F. *MoMA and The Collapse of Things. An essay on the Material Ecologies of Cultural Forms*. University of Chicago Press.

- Edited Volume:

(In preparation) Domínguez Rubio, F. and Silva, E. (Eds.). *The Infrastructures of Digital Culture*. Routledge.

- Articles:

(Under Review) Domínguez Rubio, F. “Materials for cultural sociology: Docile and Unruly Objects”. *Theory and Society*.

2013 Domínguez Rubio, F. and Silva, E. "Materials in the field: object-trajectories and object-positions in the field of contemporary art". In *Cultural Sociology*. Vol 7(2), pp. 161-178.

4. IMPACTS ON FIELD AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

a) Cultural Sociology: Through this pioneering study of conservation practices, Dr Dominguez has been able to complement his expertise in cultural sociology and contribute to the development of a new area of enquiry within the field.

b) Qualitative Methodologies: The ethnographic study conducted at MoMA has enabled Dr Dominguez to further develop expertise and experience with qualitative methodologies, especially with participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

c) Media-art conservation: By actively collaborating with conservators and staff at MoMA, Dr Dominguez gained a wealth of empirical and applied knowledge thus greatly diversifying his scientific and professional skills and expertise.

d) Interdisciplinarity and Networking: Through engagement with academic and museum environments at MoMA, NYU and CRESC, and the dissemination of work at several conferences and workshops Dr Dominguez developed a solid network of interdisciplinary collaborations between different academic and professional sectors.

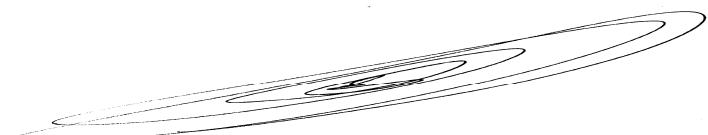
The career development of the Fellow, Dr Dominguez, was mentored and assessed as planned, via close supervision both in the outgoing phase and return phase, by Prof Silva. Annual Career Development and Staff Appraisal (CDSA) processes were followed, in line with the Open University procedures. Documents about these are available upon request.

The general assessment of the proposal is that the training programme was successful in furthering the early-career development of Dr Dominguez. It also enabled experienced researchers – Prof Silva, Prof Molotch and Dr Wharton – to mobilize resources and expand knowledge (of methodology and both of the field of art conservation and cultural sociology) in order to engage with the proposed investigation. While the fieldwork was very effectively accomplished, the return phase was equally successful. The Centre for Research on Economic and Socio-Cultural Change, CRESC, has recently created a new research theme on ‘Infrastructures’ to which this project makes substantial addition. The end of award workshop and planned publications supported by CRESC are evidence of the contribution of this investigation to new creation of knowledge and fruitful exchange of the trans-national collaboration. In sum, the project provided successful mobility both at a trans-national level (Europe and the United States) and trans-sectoral level (academia and art museum), as well as it enhanced international collaboration and exchange of expertise.

28 June 2013-08-29



Elizabeth B Silva -



Fernando Dominguez Rubio –

APPENDIX

Workshop Programme 24 June 2013 – 9.00am-5.30pm
Open University/CRESC
1-11 Hawley Crescent, Camden Town,
London NW1 8NP
<http://www3.open.ac.uk/contact/maps.aspx?contactid=1>

Infrastructures of Digital Culture

Organised by **Fernando Dominguez Rubio** (Research Fellow, Open University, CRESC) and **Elizabeth B Silva** (Professor of Sociology, Open University, CRESC) to mark the end of award for the project on **Sociological identification of the actors, practices, discourses and technologies involved in the conservation of media-art works**, Marie Curie Fellowship, European Research Council.

The emergence of the digital has been predominantly described as a move towards an increasingly immaterial and de-territorialized virtual space in which material constraints, localized practices and spatial boundaries are minimized or simply become irrelevant. The digital thus emerges in this view as a powerful vector in the construction of a novel cultural logic defined by the instantaneous and ubiquitous circulation of cultural content and form across a radically compressed time-space. In this workshop we will explore how, behind the seemingly immaterial flow of digital contents, there are a myriad of space-bound practices and large-scale infrastructures and technologies for which material and spatial considerations are still crucial. This exploration will focus on different areas including art and cultural practices, communication, finance and governance.

9.00-9:30

Arrival Tea/Coffee and Welcome

9:30-10:45

Session 1: The digital in artworks and museums

This session will explore the infrastructures required to produce, display and preserve digital art objects. More specifically, it will focus on the kind of challenges that the incorporation of the digital is posing to the art world, and specifically, how it affects, and changes, the institutional logics of value and meaning production within contemporary art museums.

a. Glenn Wharton (MoMA) and Fernando Domínguez (CRESC/Open University)

b. Ross Parry (University of Leicester)

Discussant: Jean-Paul Fourmentraux (EHESS, Paris)

11:00-12:15

Session 2: Culture and the materiality of the digital

This session will discuss how cultural claims and identities are being changed and reconfigured with the intermeshing of the digital in everyday life, as well as the kind of materials and infrastructures through which such reconfiguration is taking place.

- a. Haidy Gesimar (University College London)
- b. Nick Prior (University of Edinburgh)

Discussant: Antonia Walford (CRESC/Open University)

12:15-1:15

Lunch Break

1:15-2:30

Session 3: Territories of Digital Communication

This session will challenge contemporary understandings of digital communication as an immaterial and de-territorialized virtual process in which material constraints, localized practices and spatial boundaries are minimized or simply become irrelevant. The session will reveal how digital communication depends on complex network of infrastructures for which material and spatial considerations remain crucial.

- a. Nicole Starosielski (New York University)
- b. Jussi Parikka (Winchester School of Art)

Discussant: Hanna Knox (CRESC/University of Manchester)

2:30-3:45

Session 4: Finance Digitalization

This session will reveal the complex infrastructures operating behind the seemingly immaterial flows of global financial markets. Specifically, it will show how financial value depends on complex material and technological apparatuses, from vast data-centres to the complex software and hardware making possible practices such as automated-trading.

- a. Juan Pablo Guerra (London School of Economics)
- b. Daniel Beunza (London School of Economics)

Discussant: Liz McFall (Open University/CRESC)

4:00-5:15

Session 5: Knowledge and Governance with/in the digital

This final session will look at how the digital is reshaping the role of governance and knowledge, and the kind of different infrastructures that are deployed to this end, from databases to large-scale security apparatuses, and consider the implications of this.

- a. Ana Gross (Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies, University of Warwick)
- b. Noortje Marres (Goldsmiths College, University of London)

Discussant: Fernando Dominguez and Elizabeth Silva (Open University/CRESC)

5.14 – Wrap-up

Fernando Dominguez and Elizabeth Silva

5.30 – end