PROJECT: A CASE STUDY IN NEW MEDIA ART CURATION

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PROJECT: A CASE STUDY IN NEW MEDIA ART CURATION

by

Erin Smith

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2003

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TITLE: PROJECT: A CASE STUDY IN NEW MEDIA ART CURATION

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Robert J. Spahr

This is a case study on a new media art exhibit called “Project” which I curated at the Varsity Center for the Arts in Carbondale, Illinois. The exhibit was a culmination project for my Master of Science degree in Professional Media and Media Management at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC).

In this case study I will first discuss how new media art is currently defined in the field as well as how I define it in relation to curating the exhibit. I will then reference the history of new media art and trace its development in the context of “Project”. Next I will delve into curatorial philosophy concerning new media art, and explain why the Varsity Center for the Arts was chosen as the venue and how it was integral to the exhibit. I will then detail the decision making process that was used, the exhibit itself, and the resulting outcomes. Finally, I will discuss how the experience of curating “Project” has led me to seek new engagements with new media art and how the results of the exhibit can be potentially used for future new media art projects.
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CHAPTER 1 – DEFINING NEW MEDIA ART

Understanding how new media art is defined is crucial to understanding the challenges in its curation. A simple interpretation of the individual terms defines new media art as a form of expression utilizing developing technology. To delve deeper into the terms, we must first examine how “new media” is defined separate of art. Lev Manovich, in *The Language of New Media* (2002) delivers the most thorough explanation of new media, outlining it using five principles: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding. In essence, these principles, translated, mean that new media can be composed of digital code, compiled from multiple stand-alone elements, be operated with little human direction, re-created and reiterated in infinite versions, and layered with cultural and mechanically programmed meaning. This is not to say that all new media follows these five principles but these are “general tendencies of a culture undergoing computerization.”(Manovich, 2002, p.49) Examining art labeled as “new media” demonstrates that these characteristics apply in the same manner, not as a blanket definition but as common theme. New media art can take innovative forms such as video installations, digital photographs and projections, electronic sculpture, web-based artworks, virtual reality spaces and aesthetic technology of all types.

New media art began with the invention of photography and moving pictures, and has undergone multiple stages of transformation leading to its current interpretation. In 2006, Mark Tribe and Reena Jana described new media art as “projects that make use of emerging media technologies and are concerned with the cultural, political and aesthetic possibilities of these tools.” (p. 6) New media art is pioneering innovative uses of computers, databases, open source programming, and web networks – all incredibly user-manipulated phenomena. Utilizing this
rapidly expanding vehicle, of art media, to address a wide spectrum of controversial societal issues has amazing potential. "Curiously, while new technology itself involves a plentitude of machines, wires, and dense mathematical and physical components, that art that has been born from art-and-technology marriage is perhaps the most ephemeral art of all: the art of time." (Rush, 2005, p. 8)

In “Museums and New Media Art” (2001), Susan Morris conducted a research report, detailing her system of categorizing new media art. She identifies six major categories: Net art, Virtual Reality, Robots and agents, Artificial life forms, Digital art, and plurimedia – which is a combination of two or more categories/types of new media. This method of classification is different than other art based classification systems that group work based on a time period, topic, or movement. It relates more to a system that classifies based solely on creation medium. This classification makes sense from a museum collection point of view because, at this juncture, the future of the art form is unknown but the technology used gives museums relatable terminology in which to catalogue it. It can be expanded as the tools to create new media art develop.

The definition for new media art in my exhibit was influenced heavily by Tribe and Reena; however, I feel that new media art is defined not only by the use of technology but also the artists’ intent. The artist is the integral part of the piece – the one who creates and defines. For the purpose of this study and the exhibit I relied heavily on the artists’ self-interpretations. Definition by technology, or medium, is certainly the easiest but it does not encompass what new media art is in its entirety. A look at the historical context of new media art helped me arrive at this conclusion.
CHAPTER 2 – THE HISTORY OF NEW MEDIA ART

The simplest way to trace a history of new media in art would be through the development of the technology itself (from, say, Marey and Muybridge in photography, to Edison and the Lumiere brothers in film, and so on) but then all we would have is a timeline similar to the one devoted to the development of aviation. While certain key artists and movements in twentieth-century art present themselves as precursors to artists who work in technological media (what branch of contemporary art, for example, would not claim Marcel Duchamp as a predecessor?) with this art no straightforward linear narrative is possible. Not only are we still in the midst of the story, the story itself began and continues with simultaneous activities among different kinds of artists in separate parts of the world. (Rush, 2005, p. 9)

As Rush states above, Duchamp’s legacy is desirable lineage for any art form and it applies to new media art in spirit, if not in form. Duchamp’s readymades\(^1\) were concept art that challenged preconceived notions. Readymades were not taken seriously by many at first, seen as a joke and dismissed as an art form, but they prevailed and provoked thought on collection definitions, eventually earning inclusion into museums’ permanent collections. What is most interesting is his challenge of definition standards; because of his actions, critics were forced to expand their horizons in order to take in the concept that “everything (or, of course, nothing) is art.” (Goldsmith, 1983, p.3) New media art fits into this all-encompassing view, but is being introduced at a more rapid pace due to its technological dependence; and artists in the field are charged with keeping pace. “A Century of Art Crammed Into a Decade” by Robin H. Ray (2006)

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\(^1\) Duchamp selected commonplace objects, including a urinal provocatively entitled *Fountain*, and shook the art world by exhibiting them, often physically unaltered except for the addition of his signature, on pedestals in museums. (Goldsmith 1983, p.3)
describes new media art as, “in all its forms…not so much evolving as galloping in every direction.” (p.1)

The exponentially increasing technological advancements of today’s new media art had their start in the mid-twentieth century with portable video recorders. This technology helped foster progress in multimedia artistic groups such as Fluxus, an international network of artists, composers and designers in the 1960’s and 70’s, who produced new media art experiments. (New Art Media, 2008). Fluxus was noted for blending different artistic media and disciplines. Much like Duchamp they rallied for “an art where anything can substitute for an art work and anyone can produce it.” (Corris, 2009) The works by Fluxus were rooted in performance art and their namesake comes from the Latin word for “flow”. It is easy to see how this “flow” of work has influenced what new media art has become today.

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2 Originally conceived by the American writer, performance artist and composer George Maciunas in 1961 as the title for a projected series of anthologies profiling the work of such artists as the composer La Monte Young, George Brecht, Yoko Ono, Dick Higgins, Ben, Nam June Paik and others engaged in experimental music, concrete poetry, performance events and ‘anti-films’. (Corris, 2009.)
CHAPTER 3 – CURATING NEW MEDIA ART

As with the genre itself, interpretations of new media art fluctuate, there are technological variations, user-manipulated variations, and issues with time that all lead to an excess of potential curation decisions and techniques. Historically, most curation theory or philosophy has grown from the traditional museum setting. New media art has challenged these traditional philosophies, very much in the same way Duchamp’s work radically questioned the borders of any definition of art. Though new media art has been accepted in practice as art, we the borders of curation theories must be enlarged further in order to accommodate it. (Goldsmith, 1983, p.3)

For those in the museum field the rapid development and ever changing nature of new media art has the potential to upset many well laid plans. New media has new needs that are unlike traditional art needs, and because of this display methods can be daunting. Erkki Huhtamo (2003) raises important questions in regard to objets d’art and the loss of “aura” that new media artworks may suffer both from their change in form and exhibition style. This is a reference to Walter Benjamin’s theory that “the ‘aura’, understood as an object’s relationship to its own unique history, was disappearing as a consequence of the spreading of mass reproduction technologies.” (p.6) Huhtamo states that virtual environments and the presentation of new media art forms have the ability to enhance visitor experiences, allow for closer inspection, and thus create deeper audience involvement. However, Benjamin’s theory persists throughout, expanding to include new media; viewer response is essentially changed by the form of the media. Digital media, photographs, videos, and much of the new media art can be reproduced exactly, unlike more traditional artworks such as paintings and sculpture. The authentic feel, or “aura” that exemplifies traditional, original artworks possess, seems to be missing. Huhtamo acknowledges

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that there are benefits to the new presentation, but makes us keenly aware of the contradiction of art experiences being sacrificed by new media. Understanding that the perceived sacrifice can affect the viewer, the curator must decide if there is a benefit that makes the loss worthwhile.

Eduardo Kac (1999) thinks there is a benefit, stating so in “Negotiating Meaning: the Dialogic Imagination in Electronic Art”. Kac, like Huhtamo, observes that an element is lost in electronic art, but feels that there are other benefits to be gained. Kac approaches electronic art through Bakhtin\(^4\) dialogic philosophy. New media art embodies this philosophy in a way that traditional art does not. Kac insists that the dialogue between a new media exhibit and the visitor opens new channels of interpretation based upon the actions of the visitor. An artwork, by engaging more than one of the viewer’s senses, instigates a dialogic experience. This is similar to the opinion of John Weber (2007) in “Thinking Spatially: New Literacy, Museums, and the Academy”. Weber feels that museum visitors are better positioned to adapt as new media develops because of their exposure in the museum. Museums present a lateral way of learning that is advantageous to the public; it provides an example of multiple ways of imparting information, especially in terms of new media art, thus improving “visual literacy” (p. 68). Combining the thoughts of both Kac and Weber, a new context is made available: the literacy of a visual dialogue. This new context poses the question of whether new media art is helping or harming the education of audiences.

Alison Griffiths (2007) probes the subject of how to process and present the changes that have occurred within museums in relation to new media art and technology. The authenticity, authorship, and access of new media art have all been challenged. Griffiths uses the phrase “edutainment” to express the concern that new media art is in danger of becoming a shallow marketing tool not unlike amusement parks or shopping malls. Griffiths, unlike many authors,

\(^{4}\) Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogic was a platform for the study of the literary genre of the novel. This can only be accomplished via face-to-face interactions or with two-way media. (Bostad, et. al, 2004)
offers a solution; she suggests that we look to the past in order to gain insight into the method to approach and mold the present situation away from becoming something undesirable. A balance must be realized between “vulgar sideshows and elitist enclaves.” (p.4) Griffiths believes artists can make compromises without sacrificing content to the lowest common denominator. Being aware that current new media art reflects new media art of the late 20th century can guide important decision making. Many institutions have become amnesiacs where new media precedence is concerned, but Griffiths assures us that “lessons can be learnt…given the perennial nature of debates on the introduction of new media technologies.” (p.5)

Curating new media art must involve a change in thinking. Instead of bearing the descriptive of “art in technological times,” it must instead represent “life in technological times” (Graham & Cook, 2010, p. 286-287). Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook say that because we are dealing with “life in technological times” the best way to curate it - “to produce, present, disseminate, distribute, know, explain, historicize” it - is to know “its characteristics and its behaviors, rather than imposing a theory on the art” (p. 304-305). I agree that the knowledge of characteristics and behaviors in new media art are required in curation but I disagree with their resistance to use of established theory. Viewing patterns, audience studies, and other museum research inform curators of how to guide their audience through a new art experience. A familiar setting, a traditional layout path to viewing, signage, and the simple practice of being a good hostess aid a curator in gaining the audience’s trust even before they view the first piece. Knowing this, I looked to my past experiences in a traditional museum setting in order to create my exhibit.
CHAPTER 4 – FORMING “PROJECT”

My undergraduate degree is a Bachelor of Arts in English and Museum Studies; heavily focusing on museum work. The University Museum on SIUC’s campus afforded me the opportunity to curate multiple exhibits, both assigned and self-directed. A secondary degree is almost a requirement for work in the museum field so I applied and was accepted into a museum studies master’s program. The program was extremely conventional, dealing with the tried and true cannon of “preserve and present” common in museums. Modern and contemporary curation methods were not covered in the curriculum. So, when an unexpected turn of events beckoned me back to southern Illinois, I left the program. I was drawn to the College of Mass Communication and Media Arts; here I could combine both areas of my interests, communication and art, in a progressive atmosphere. Searching for a culmination topic along this theme, I found myself drawn to the inherent issues of new media art curation in museums.

Researching new media art presented a documented resistance to the “new” in the museum setting. The Mellon Strategic Group (2005), “New Media” addresses the apprehension that is felt by museums in the “conflicted role as both public steward and moral guardian of culture.” For my exhibit I wanted to act only as a steward without limiting my audience by appointing myself as their “guardian”. In many cases museums must implement new policies in regard to preservation methods with new media, along with making momentous decisions on what is “original” in terms of these new artifacts. Because of this, factors such as the artist’s vision and the museum’s objective can be at odds.

Another important influence in my pursuit to curate new media art was the artist Claes Oldenburg. Oldenburg’s idea of what “art is” grew out of a resistance to the traditional museum.
He wrote “I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum.” (1967) This statement begins a manifesto for Oldenburg’s creations, the entirety of which was published in the book *Store Days*, by Claes Oldenburg and Emmett Williams. This proclamation boldly asserts and instantly attaches a deeper meaning to all of Oldenburg’s artwork. His pieces strained against the role of cultural/moral guardianship that is often self-appointed by museums. And though his work was not technically what I would define as new media it shares a commonality with it – a reminder of the everyday world around us. Oldenburg states “My personal struggle has been to return painting to the tangible object, which is like returning the personality to touching and feeling the world around it, to offset the tendency to vagueness and abstraction. To remind people of practical activity, to suggest the senses and not escape from the senses, to substitute flesh and blood for paint.” (1995, p. 14)

The issues of curation and my love for Oldenburg’s manifesto inspired me to make curating new media art my culminating research project. I hoped to gain a firsthand understanding of the challenges present when curating a new media art exhibit. Ultimately, my exhibit “Project” was the result of this endeavor.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word “project” with twenty-one variations. As a noun it can mean a plan, proposal or scheme; an undertaking requiring concerted effort. As a verb, project means to cause an image to appear on a surface: project the slide onto a screen or to produce a projection. It is also the definition of directing one's voice so as to be heard. The final definition, the one that spoke to me was; to attribute or assign something in one's own mind or a personal characteristic to a person, group, or object. This single word embodied my desire to

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explore new media art: to plan an exhibit, a technical form new media art can take, giving a
voice to the art form, and, finally, projecting my ideas of new media art to a larger audience
CHAPTER 5 – THE VARSITY CENTER FOR THE ARTS

As I have discussed, most of the references I have encountered for curating new media art refer to exhibits that take place in a museum, with established protocol and expectations. For “Project” I could have proposed the use the University Museum on campus, but I believed that the Varsity Center for the Arts (VCA) was a better site; it would allow for greater creativity and a more authentic experience for the audience. I felt that the pieces fit seamlessly into the site, linking its past as a movie theatre to its present, and future, as an arts center. By removing new media art from a museum setting, I could remove some of the impediments other curators faced.

“Museums are not monoliths: they can and do change, and curators working in museums are also highly variable.” (Graham & Cook, 2010, p. 211) I felt that if more traditional institutions could, and were, changing, why not a new entity such as the VCA? The Varsity Center for the Arts was born in 2008 as a partnership between The Jackson County Stage Company and Carbondale Community Arts. Its home, and the organization’s namesake, was the Varsity Theatre, which originally opened in 1940 as a traditional, single screen, movie theatre. (See Appendix A, p. 32) The appendix shows a photograph of the original building exterior. The theater was later twinned, and finally triplexed; at the time the VCA took up residence there were still three distinct theatre spaces. The last operator, Kerasotes Theatres closed the building to the public in May, 2003. In early-2008, it was acquired from Kerasotes by the city of Carbondale and donated to the Jackson County Stage Company, which planned to renovate and restore the historic theatre as a venue for live theatrical productions.6 Carbondale Community Arts was brought on board to expand the arts mission.

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6 Information derived from the following sites: [http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/2876](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/2876)  
[http://www.varsitycenterforthearts.org/About-Us](http://www.varsitycenterforthearts.org/About-Us)
On January 1, 2009, I became the first Director of Development for the VCA. My introductory goal, put forth by the board, was to increase the visibility and support, in Carbondale and the southern Illinois region, for the project to renovate and restore the Varsity Center for the Arts. At that time I had no experience in fundraising but took on the challenge, I saw my background in museum curation as tool to develop the Varsity space. The all-volunteer operated Jackson County Stage Company and I were the only permanent inhabitants residing in the space at the time; the other partner, Carbondale Community Arts, had a presence in the meeting room/gallery space but their main offices were elsewhere since limited renovations had been made to the building. By promoting the relationship of the newly founded VCA to its past media roots, I felt I could open the eyes of the arts community to the exciting potential of the space.

The Varsity Theatre was originally classified as Art-Moderne style but as the years went on, renovations were made to expand the space and the style became a conglomeration of design eras and errors. Large, uneven, sandstone that was popular in the 1970-80’s was added to the front. (See Appendix A, p. 32) The building space to the south went through much iteration including a pharmacy, diner, video store, and arcade; the VCA eventually designated it as a small, traditional art gallery that could also function as a community meeting space, including a small kitchenette area. Adjacent storefronts to the north had been acquired during previous ownership and turned into what is now called the East Theatre. Due to these changes much of the original elegance had been lost, save for the main lobby entrance and the marquee out front. The East Theatre was the first space within the theatre to be remodeled for artistic use. The Stage Company removed the original screen and built a stage for their productions. The space referred to as the Main Theatre was originally the only theatre, complete with a balcony; which had later
been converted into a separate theatre. Neither of these two spaces had been used for anything more than storage since the closing of the theatre. (See Appendix A, p. 32) The appendix shows photographs of the current exterior, the renovated East Theatre and Lobby, and the untouched Main Theatre space. The main goal of the VCA was to restore the theatre to its original grandeur while improving the functionality of the space.

Looking at the VCA as simply a former theatre ignores the important role of film and theatre as predecessors to what is now defined as new media art.

"Theater, dance, and performance art have always been interdisciplinary, or "multi-media," forms. For centuries, dance has been an intimate marriage with music and has included the visual elements of sets, props, costume, and lighting to enhance the body in space. Theater, from its ritual roots through classical manifestations to contemporary experimental forms, has similarly incorporated all of the above, while additionally foregrounding the human voice and spoken text. Throughout the centuries, theater has been quick to recognize and utilize the dramatic and aesthetic potentials of new technologies: Theatre has always used the cutting edge technology of the time to enhance the "spectacle" of productions. From the early Deus ex machine, to the guild-produced Medieval pageant wagons, to the introduction of gas, and later electric, lighting effects, to the modern use of computer to control lighting, sound and set changes, technology has been used in ways that have created incredible visual and auditory effects." (Dixon, 2007, p.39-40)

Prior to “Project” the VCA had already made an assumption of what art was and how the building could be used. They had set about planning the space with a very traditional gallery space that could accommodate two-dimensional works as well as small scale three-dimensional
works. The gallery space was also set to double as a community meeting room complete with a small kitchenette area. The already renovated East Theatre had been equipped with a small stage, sound and light board for live productions. Plans for the Main Theatre and Balcony Theatre included reuniting the two spaces into a semblance of their original splendor this time with a large stage and, perhaps, an orchestra pit in order to accommodate musical and theatrical performances. These plans would not allow for easily manipulated space but rather a very staid interpretation of what an arts center is and how art should behave.

For “Project” I wanted to become an agent of change. I wanted to fully access the defined local interpretation of the VCA space and transition it to adjust to a new audience and new opportunity. I wanted to challenge the notion that each space should be carved out for specific uses. If the VCA was to be a true community venture then it needed to remain open to multiple art forms, flexible and easily transformable. “Many other types of art organizations have emerged as a result of the need to engage with immateriality of the artwork and a desire to present new media art in a formally appropriate fashion…” (Graham & Cook, 2010, p. 81-82) New media art has the ability to revive a space thus providing the potential to enable a former venue to function differently and innovatively. As a new media arts center I envisioned the VCA as flexible and adaptable to the needs of the both the local artists and the greater community.
CHAPTER 6 - AUDIENCE

“Curators are in a difficult situation of having to predict where art is going next and invite into the organization those avant-garde artists who are busy creating their own new structures for legitimating their practices. This situation has long been a point of contention in the field of new media art.” (Graham & Cook, 2010, p. 40) For “Project” I made an active decision use a space where I could minimize imposing any preconceived notions on the artists. I wanted to provide a venue that would allow them to realize their visions and enable them to act in partnership with the space. Barnaby Drabble (Graham & Cook, 2010, p. 10) captures this sentiment for me in “Fw: March Theme”:

For me curating is a mode, not a simple question of display or production, curating is always authorial in some way (I can outsource control but not my responsibility for starting something) and you are likely to find as many models suitable for contemporary art and for new media art, because at its heart curating for me is not about the display of work (be that in a gallery, or on the Internet), it is about the development of critical meaning in partnership and discussion with artists and publics.

The essence of curation lies at the intersection where the artist, the art, the space and the audience meet. "All art is an interaction between the viewer and the artwork, and thus all artworks are interactive in the sense that a negotiation or confrontation takes place between the beholder and the beheld." (Dixon, 2007, p. 560) With “Project” I wanted to ensure that the audience had the opportunity to understand what the artists meant to convey and that they were also able to create their own meaning from the experience. I attempted to consider what the audience would gain from the work based on the manner it was presented; I tried to consider the
overall flow of the exhibit and attempted to avoid confusion or frustration during their experience.

The abundance of research on audience and visitor patterns shows that people will choose what interests them. There is, in the end, no discernable or predictable pattern that can be settled upon for planning purposes. Ultimately people make their decisions based upon pre-determined personal interest factors and harbor their own goals for their visit experience. (Falk & Dierking, 1992) For “Project” the new media art determined final layout of the exhibit.

In “Art as Experience: Meet the Active Audience,” (2006) Josephine Bosma said, “The best way to capture the attention of the audience is by showing hospitality, by creating playful and interesting spaces of engagement.” (p. 124) With any new exhibit, curators must take into account the length of patron engagement. The curator must consider the following: how long an audience would want to spend with each piece, what the artist’s intentions on viewing time are, and is the piece multi-dimensional, requiring extra time for interaction? “Video art, sound art, performance art, or new media art…may have a nominal or compulsory duration of anything from a few seconds to many hours. Curator Hannah Redler confirms the important fact that the audience ‘need(s) to know the level of ‘commitment’ in advance. And as Graham and Cook point out, “even if a new media artwork is not narrative, then time is still necessary to understand new concepts and new interfaces.” (Graham & Cook, 2010, p. 101)

To meet audience needs I went through a three-step process. First, I scheduled individual visits with the artists to introduce them to the space. According to Graham and Cook (2010), this is the best starting point, “as curators grow more familiar with their own experiences when using new media tools, they will become more aware of audience behavior. Above all, they should turn to the artists themselves, who have observed most widely and who have been willing
to collaborate with those whose roles may be regarded as educational, design oriented, scientific, or technical. It is the nature of new media art to cross boundaries between technical and behavioral knowledge and hence for its practitioners to be capable of translating across these barriers.” (p. 183-4) Next, I asked each artist to submit a proposal stating the general overview of their piece and its technological and space requirements. After reviewing the proposals, I designed the exhibit floor plan based upon both the artists and audience needs. A few examples of the artists’ needs were display requirements, such as screens, projectors, and electrical outlets; audience needs included accessibility, seating, and signage.

An interview by Virginia Rutledge with artist Bill Viola done in March 1998, titled “Art at the End of the Optical Age,” for Art in America, sheds light on topic of viewer reaction to new media forms. Viola, like Michael Rush (1999), felt that video art seemed “out of sync” with not only museums and galleries, but people in general. Now, with advances in technology, new forms of art media have bridged the gap. Viola states that artists must realize some of the limitations of venues and adapt to them accordingly; for instance, a ninety minute long video installation piece will not capture and stay the full attention of a circulating visitor. In order to have a successful exhibit, one that satisfies both the artist and the viewer, Viola feels that a new level of understanding must continuously be striven for. What Viola does not account for in his analysis of the audience is that museum audiences are not static, they are constantly changing. Though hinting at the realization that new art must weather a trial period of initial resistance, Rush depicts the acceptance process as a drawn out matter, which in my case was a cause for concern.

As a life-long inhabitant of southern Illinois, my first exposure to art was not at a grand institution displaying ages of tradition, it was at home. I come from a family of artists; my
father’s work can be described as a combination of R. Crumb\(^7\) and traditional folk art\(^8\), my aunt does small scale, painted, sculptures, and my grandmother’s artistry runs the gamut of traditional mediums – painting, drawing, fiber work, pottery, and photography. To me, they represent the art of the area. No contemporary museums or galleries exist in the southern half of the state and not much new media artwork was being explored outside of the SIU campus. Carbondale, with its campus art museum, various student run exhibition spaces, and college offerings in a range of art forms is a cultural oasis amid historical societies and handi-crafts. That being said, southern Illinois is not living in the technology-deprived vacuum. The general population has internet access, even in extremely rural areas and, as media technology advances and becomes more popularly available, it grows in familiarity with the general public. This growth promotes acceptance as emergent technology becomes a part of everyday life. The incorporation of the now familiar media tools into art spaces brings with them a new ease and openness without immediate dismissal their innate complexity. With this knowledge I was reassured that although an appreciation for it had not been cultivated, introducing the “new” of new media art to a new audience and space were the roots to grow awareness.

\(^7\) Robert Crumb is an American cartoonist known for his satirical drawings.  
\(^8\) Folk art is generally characterized as self-taught artists creating work that is at once utilitarian and decorative.
CHAPTER 7 - RESOURCES

As a professional fundraiser, I was very much aware of how difficult it can be to obtain funding. My experience in museum work introduced me to the funding dilemma most arts organizations face at an early point in my career. The findings from the survey Art Museums and Media, Film, Video, CD-ROM & Interactive Media in U.S. Art Museums (1994), dismally reiterate Wienand’s (2006) observations on museum funding. “While art museums have clearly recognized the role that media is coming to play in their institutions, that recognition is not fully supported in their budgets. In all areas of museum media, funding remains the single major constraint.” (p. 9) Lack of funding is not limited to the single area of new media art pieces; it is also short in the area of staff training. The survey does suggest that an increase in cooperation and collaboration among museums in regard to both media and professional resources could effectively ease some of the budgetary limitations. Having neither staff nor funding for “Project” I sought advice from my research and looked for the opportunity for collaboration.

In the review “The Creative Landscape of Independent Curators” (2010) Hans Ulrich Obrist, co-director of exhibitions and programs and director of international projects at the contemporary art gallery, The Serpentine, speaks on behalf of collaboration. “It used to be that one curator would draw a master plan of the exhibition,” said Mr. Obrist. “I’ve always thought it’s more interesting to create a more polyphonic situation where you have several curatorial voices within an exhibition.” This idea of curatorial collaboration gave me a direction to seek a realistic solution to one of my largest obstacles. Derek Smith, who would become a participating artist, and Susan Felleman, my program mentor, had previously approached me about the possibility of showing a film series at the VCA. Knowing their connections to the local arts community and interest in new media art, I consulted with them about my ideas on a new media
arts exhibit and was rewarded with their enthusiasm. Together we appealed to artists from SIU’s departments of Mass Communication and Media Arts and Visual Art and Design. “The common interests that new media art and contemporary art share concerning process, participation, and audiences, however, can form a bridge that links new media systems to art systems. Bliss might be attained through adopting a hybrid working method: sharing skills, collaborating, and taking time to think and explore new art and new contexts” (Graham & Cook 2010. p. 295). I quickly found that what I could not provide in the way of funding, I could with space, knowledge of curation and support for the artists venturing into new territory.
CHAPTER 8 – THE ARTISTS

The participating artists were: Lindsey Greer, Josh Gumiela, Mark Pease, Derek Smith, Robert Spahr, and Jason Wonnell. Initial introductions were made over a flurry of emails and an initial meeting in June provided the opportunity to introduce the artists to the VCA. They were given very loose restrictions as part of the interest was in knowing how each artist would define new media art for themselves. "Aesthetic questions abound, as they did with video art, but, as with video, which is now present in every international survey of contemporary art, if artists apply their tenacity to it, art will emerge." (Rush, 2005, p. 183) After the first in-person meeting I worked out individual times to access the building with each artist for their installations. The artists and I made inquiries into utilizing necessary technical equipment with the VCA and the within various departments at SIUC. The cooperative effort brought together the exhibit framework and we set the dates to display on September 3rd and 4th, 2010, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. each night.

On the evenings of the exhibit, guests entered the main lobby and were asked to sign in on the guest list. They were then given a handout with the curatorial statement and a listing of the locations, title, and artist name of each display and invited to view the exhibits at their own discretion. The handout also had a short, one to two sentence summary of each piece, provided by the artist. (See Appendix B, p. 35) The guests wandered in and out of the rooms, stopping to mingle and converse.

The result of this collaboration was beyond anything I could have planned on my own. The individual pieces fit seamlessly into the space, as it had been designed specifically for this purpose. The three original screening areas, the Balcony Theatre, Main Theatre and East Theatre, were equipped with screens and theatre seating for viewers to take in the more lengthy video
works: Lindsey Greer’s “Hypnagogia”, Mark Pease’s “Opening Sequence”, and Rob Spahr’s “Great Transnational Nude Cruft”. Josh Gumiela’s work, “Descendant,” required a small, enclosed space that would insulate sound and envelope the audience: the former Boiler Room. Derek Smith’s display of two silent, looping, video pieces, “Video Portrait #1 (Lindsey)” and “TV on Its Own”, were able to be shown in the Hallway Gallery. “Stock Pile” Jason Wonnell’s installation of multiple televisions utilized the private meeting room/traditional gallery space which provided the necessary three-dimensional viewing and sound-insulated setting. The artists provided statements explaining their works which were displayed at the entrance to each area. (See Appendix C, p. 38) They were also at the exhibit opening to meet with guests and answer any inquiries about their works in person. Each piece was unique and the exhibit offered a variety of examples within the definition of new media art.
CHAPTER 9 – CHALLENGES

The experience of curating on such a large scale and incorporating multiple goals was intimidating. I set out to provide the following: a potential new definition to the VCA, an experience to the community, an opportunity to new media artists, and finalize my educational goal. Each of these goals presented an individual challenge to me as the curator. One major impediment to offering the experience of new media art to the community was the restriction on public admittance to the space. Because of its unfinished state, several of the spaces being utilized were restricted from public use. Reaching out to local media for publicity then became a problem – how could I inform the population of southern Illinois that this event was taking place only to tell them that they could not attend? Per my rental agreement with the space, the event had to be by “invitation only.”

To meet this challenge, I hired a local graphic designer, Alex Halbrook, to create an invitation with an image that expressed the combination of new media with a representation of the space. (See Appendix D, p. 49) Each artist received a stack of these postcard-sized invitations to distribute. In addition to this, I decided to take action through a popular new media tool; I set up a Facebook event and made it “invitation only”, then invited every “friend” in the area to attend and extend the invitation to their friends. As an additional measure to ensure that neither I, nor the Varsity Center for the Arts, were cited for violating code, a waiver was added to the guest sign in sheet that acknowledged the state of these spaces and the risk of entering them.

One major element that I would have liked to change was this issue of public access. The restrictions on the space usage prevented the presentation of new media from being truly accessible to a larger audience. Given more time, I would have sought out funding or assistance to video the exhibit and stream it from the VCA website, adding yet another media aspect to the
exhibit. Despite the limited exposure to the local population, over one hundred guests came to view the exhibit during the two night run. I considered this to be a huge success. Visitors came for various reasons: to support a friend or family member in this endeavor, to satisfy a curiosity about the space, for the sake of art and art alone, or simply because an invitation had been extended. And, whatever their reason, the feedback was all positive. In many ways the exhibit exceeded my expectations. One visitor in particular eased all of my doubts. A woman that I had never met before walked in as soon as the doors were opened. I was a bundle of nerves, she just smiled at me and said, “Relax, you have a beautiful space and the art will speak for itself.” I realized that at that moment, I had accomplished what I wanted to do – project my appreciation for a “new” art form into an old space in order to give it a possible new path in its life.

“Project” was a success and opened the community’s eyes to the possibility of new use for an old space. Shortly after the exhibit at the VCA I was offered the opportunity to move to a larger arts organization; and though I felt passionate about my mission at the VCA, my economic needs dictated that I take advantage of the career change. I continue to monitor the status of the Varsity Center for the Arts, and I am pleased to report it has continued to grow as a venue for music, film, and theatre. Hopefully, another entrepreneurial curator with an interest in new media art will come along to follow in my footsteps. I plan to use the experience of curating “Project” to my advantage in my new setting at the Center for Creative Arts (COCA) in Saint Louis, Missouri. The visual arts program is still in its growing stage at the organization but we are lucky enough to have an on-site gallery in the space. I am excited to say that the visual arts program director and I have taken the preliminary steps in planning a new media art exhibit. My role in the education department will also allow me to incorporate new media art into the teaching curriculum. The educational component of “Project” was presented in a simplified and wide-
sweeping manner as a general introduction of new media art to community at large. At COCA, we will be incorporating new media into summer arts camp programming beginning in June of this year. Our students, ages six to eighteen will be offered several options to use video, computers, and various other media tools to aid them in their artistic endeavors. By working with youth to integrate media into their artistic practices they will grow up with an acceptance of new media art that has not yet come to fruition with previous generations. My hope is that I will be able to influence these new artists to seek out ways of creating and displaying their new media artworks in ways I have yet to imagine. This leaves me wondering what the next “new media” art will be, and how it will be shared with future audiences.
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Appendix A

Photos of the Varsity Center for the Arts

1. Original Exterior

![Original Exterior Image]

2. Current Exterior

![Current Exterior Image]
Appendix A (Continued)

3. Renovated Lobby

![Renovated Lobby Image]

4. Renovated East Theatre

![Renovated East Theatre Image]
Appendix A (Continued)

5. Main Theatre
Appendix B

Gallery Handout: Curatorial Statement and Exhibit Guide

Erin Smith - Curatorial Statement

The idea for this exhibit came to me while working as the Director of Development for the Varsity Center for the Arts. My job was to raise funds to restore the Varsity for use by Carbondale Community Arts, The Stage Co. and the community. In order to do that I needed to make the mission of the organization known—bring attention to what a valuable space the building could be to the community. Also, I was looking for a thesis project to serve as the culmination to my degree. I had previously curated exhibits at the University Museum and was involved with the organization of several different artists’ shows in the Carbondale area. With the help of Derek Smith, a participating artist, and Susan Felleman, my mentor, I was able to gather together this group of new media artists, all of whom came together with enthusiasm and ideas for the spaces beyond anything I could have planned alone. Project is the result of all this....in various interpretations:

n. pro·ject
A plan or proposal; a scheme. See Synonyms at plan.
An undertaking requiring concerted effort: a community cleanup project.
v. pro·ject
v.tr.
To cause (an image) to appear on a surface: projected the slide onto a screen.
To produce (a projection).
To direct (one's voice) so as to be heard clearly at a distance.
To externalize and attribute (an emotion or motive, for example) unconsciously to someone or something else in order to avoid anxiety.
To convey an impression of to an audience or to others: a posture that projects defeat.
v.intr
To direct one's voice so as to be heard clearly at a distance.
Lindsay Greer
Balcony Theater

“Much of my video work functions as a kind of visual diary, reveling in the details I discover as I watch the world through a camera, or the moments I uncover while editing found footage. My work in handmade film isn’t simply about my encounter with the film as material; it’s about the moment I realized the image contained within the frames wasn’t indelible, and the truth contained within those images could be subject to my endless revision.”

Josh Gumiela
Boiler Room

“While we’re severed from the first-hand experience of our ancestors, we remain tied to our family history by the memories and stories that have gradually filtered down to us through the preceding generations. As time goes on, those stories break down into increasingly finer grains of knowledge, shifting the boundaries between fact and fiction as they’re passed down from generation to generation. My postmemory work rejoins and scatters the many fragmented stories I’ve been told about my family’s immigration to the U.S. as displaced persons, revealing the creative nature of recall and gradual dispersion of family history.”

Mark Pease
Main Theater

“Motion pictures have for decades created an environment for escape. The theatre space (with its furniture, décor and atmosphere) creates an ambience that is instantly insulating and cozy. The ability for the theatre and the anticipation of the start of the film to transport the audience to a state of relaxation and imagination is something I want to suspend. One of my intentions for OPENING SEQUENCE is to prolong a sense of escape.”
Appendix B (Continued)

Derek Smith  
TV ON ITS OWN
Hall Gallery

TV On Its Own extends the moment between when a television is on and off. It is the only moment when a TV displays something other than input from outside sources.

VIDEO PORTRAIT #1 (LINDSEY)

I am interested in extending the fleeting moments of the everyday. Pause. Exist. Video Portrait #1 is from a series of 30 minute portraits inspired by early photography, when a subject had to sit still for an extended duration in order for the exposure to be made. I ask my subject to silently sit as still as they can for a half hour in front of me and my camera. What begins as an awkward, uncomfortable situation becomes a relaxing meditation.

“Then somebody asked, 'Are you a part of Zen?' Dennis said, 'No, but Zen is a part of us.'”
-La Monte Young, Lecture 1960

Robert Spahr  
GREAT TRANSNATIONAL NUDE CRUFT
East Theater

"...the point of public relations slogans like "Support Our Troops" is that they don't mean anything [...] that's the whole point of good propaganda. You want to create a slogan that nobody is gonna be against and I suppose everybody will be for, because nobody knows what it means, because it doesn't mean anything. But its crucial value is that it diverts your attention from a question that does mean something, do you support our policy? And that's the one you're not allowed to talk about."
Noam Chomsky. Interviewed by unidentified interviewer. WBAI. January 1992

Jason Wonnell  
STOCK PILE
Varsity Gallery

“The tools of war and the tools of media are related to one another more closely and in more ways than it may seem on the surface. My television sculptures and installations are intended to blur the line between media and war. The televisions are intended to be seen as the machines of destruction they can be.”
Appendix C

Individual artist statements accompanied by photos.

**Lindsay Greer-** Hypnagogia

For me, art has rarely existed as a process with a fixed beginning and an end. I approach art as a process of navigation, using it as a means to educate myself about whatever interests me at any given moment. Each new project is a source of discovery, and because of this, all of my work tends to adopt an introspective tone. Much of my video work functions as a kind of visual diary, reveling in the details I discover as I watch the world through a camera, or the moments I uncover while editing found footage. My work in handmade film isn’t simply about my encounter with the film as material; it’s about the moment I realized the image contained within the frames wasn’t indelible, and the truth contained within those images could be subject to my endless revision. As a lover of poetry, I feed on rhythm, and often end up creating visual rhythms rather than representational work that can be read as a linear text.

Two artists that have influenced my work are Naomi Uman and Zoe Beloff. Naomi Uman’s handmade techniques have influenced the aesthetic of my work, while Zoe Beloff’s work deals in spectacle, proto-cinema, dreams, and other processes of the unconscious: all which serve as an inspiration for the content of my work.
Appendix C (continued)

Josh Gumiela - Descendant

The subject matter deals with postmemory and displacement, which is represented through my own family history and experience as displaced persons after WWII.

"While we’re severed from the first-hand experience of our ancestors, we remain tied to our family history by the memories and stories that have gradually filtered down to us through the preceding generations. As time goes on, those stories break down into increasingly finer grains of knowledge, shifting the boundaries between fact and fiction as they’re passed down from generation to generation. My postmemory work rejoins and scatters the many fragmented stories I’ve been told about my family’s immigration to the U.S. as displaced persons, revealing the creative nature of recall and gradual dispersion of family history."

Influences:

Marianne Hisrch – Hirsch writes a great deal about the concept of postmemory, which helped me understand my place within my own family’s history and set me on a path to better understanding the “unknowable” first-hand experience of my parents and grandparents. Postmemory also serves as the basis for my MFA thesis work.

Golan Levin – Levin’s interactive new media work introduced me to the idea of “infinite repeatability” and the important role the viewer can play in
Appendix C (continued)

a work of art. Many of Levin’s ideas have found their way into my use of technology, materials, and user interaction in an effort to make my work more generalized, effective, and accessible across a broader audience.

Zimoun – Zimoun’s sound sculptures and installations influenced my current practice of using basic technology in a minimal way to say a lot about how we experience the modern world, especially in regards to dense populations of ubiquitous-yet-invisible technologies that drive our daily lives. Zimoun’s use of scale has taught me how an overabundance of a particular sound, image, or object can directly cut through to the concept or idea of an artwork.
Mark Pease - Opening Sequence 2010

My work typically deals with architectural formations, surfaces and materials that make-up our built environment. These places are of interest to me for their ability to articulate absences and intervals between spaces that we are less prone to observe. The natural ability for such neutral environments to trigger moments of reverié and dislocations in perceiving allows for the observation of the void to be enriched and examined on a more conscious level.

Opening Sequence is a 12 minute looping video with sound that depicts the opening credits of a fictitious movie that never truly begins. While being a departure from my other studio activities, it does have consistencies with ideas that I enjoy exploring. Motion pictures have for decades created an environment for escape. The theatre space (with its furniture, decor and atmosphere) creates an ambience that is instantly insulating and cozy. The ability for the theatre and the anticipation of the start of the film to transport the audience to a state of relaxation and imagination is something I want to suspend. Anyone who steps into the theatre (no matter when) will experience the opening credits., music and visuals and hopefully feel that a movie is about to start. One of my intentions for Opening Sequence is to prolong a sense of escape.
Appendix C (continued)

Derek Smith

TV On Its Own

TV On Its Own extends the moment between when a television is on and off. It is the only moment when a TV displays something other than input from outside sources.
Appendix C (continued)

Video Portrait #1 (Lindsey)

I am interested in extending the fleeting moments of the everyday. Pause. Exist.

Video Portrait #1 is from a series of 30 minute portraits inspired by early photography, when a subject had to sit still for an extended duration in order for the exposure to be made. I ask my subject to silently sit as still as they can for a half hour in front of me and my camera. What begins as an awkward, uncomfortable situation becomes a relaxing meditation.

“Then somebody asked, 'Are you a part of Zen?' Dennis said, 'No, but Zen is a part of us.'”

-La Monte Young, Lecture 1960
Appendix C (continued)

**Robert Spahr** - Great Transnational Nude Cruft

http://www.robertspahr.com/work/gtn/

Created by fully automated scripts using source images from the Internet.

This cruft algorithm selects the name of a large corporation from a listing on Transnationale.org, and passes that name as a search term into Altavista Image Search. The search results of corporate imagery are then composited with a national flag downloaded from WikiMedia, as well as a recent image of a nude female from KindGirls.com to generate this cruft image....the point of public relations slogans like "Support Our Troops" is that they don't mean anything [...] that's the whole point of good propaganda. You want to create a slogan that nobody is gonna be against and I suppose everybody will be for, because nobody knows what it means, because it doesn't mean anything. But its crucial value is that it diverts your attention from a question that does mean something, do you support our policy? And that's the one you're not allowed to talk about.

Noam Chomsky. Interviewed by unidentified interviewer. WBAI. January 1992
Robert Spahr: Interviewed by John Hutchinson

Instant Messenger Log, August 29th, 2010*

Q: Robert, I was recently looking at your latest work you call 'Great Transnational Nude', it is created from downloading source images from the Internet, which you then combine into a new image you call 'Cruft'?

SPAHR: Yes.

Q: Some people have claimed that 'Cruft' is not really art, but that you are only reusing the work of others?

SPAHR: Yes that is true. In the case of the Great Transnational Nude, I found this website called KindGirls.com, where there are these great images of nude girls. It is so much easier to download the images, than to go to the trouble of taking my own photos. I combine the nudes with national flags as well as the corporate name and images used by so many different transnational corporations.

Q: Using technology the way you do seems to put a distance between the image making process and the actual produced images. Do you feel alienated from the product of your labor?

SPAHR: Oh yes, I do not feel like I have made the images. The machines make the art. This gives me much more free time, compared to when I used to make traditional art.

Q: The machines are computers?

SPAHR: Yes. I automate the work. I write the computer programs once, and they just keep running, producing art work over and over again following my simple recipes. Technology makes art making so easy anyone can do it. I get impatient now, so when I need an image, I use a search engine like Google. Who has time to make images, when search engines are so fast.
Appendix C (continued)

Q: Writing these computer programs must be difficult and a time consuming process? How long does it usually take?

SPAHR: It's quite easy. People make Cruft all the time. All you have to do is put images together. I don't know what it will look like, but I am always happy with the results when I put two images together. Sometimes I can't make up my mind which two images, so I just let the computer decide.

Q: How did you come up with the title 'Great Transnational Nude'?

SPAHR: There was a pop artist by the name of Tom Wesselman who produced a series of paintings called 'Great American Nude' which incorporated representational images with a patriotic theme, including those of nude women and 1960's consumerism. I was inspired by this series of images as well as his choice of colors which were limited to red, white and blue along with gold and khaki. I think his paintings are just great.

Q: Do you think your Cruft image 'Great Transnational Nude' contains a similar social commentary or political message?

SPAHR: No. I do not put anything into the Crufts except the original source images.

Q: What about your choice to use the names and images of transnational corporations? In some of your past work you even use images pulled right from the main stream media, such as CNN. Aren't the downloaded images from these sources charged with political content?

SPAHR: They are the images of our time, and anyone who uses a web browser or watches T.V. is familiar with these types of images. They are the digital leftovers of our contemporary media consumption. You don't have to think about it. They are all very familiar.

Q: So why do you make this type of art you call Cruft?
SPAHR: Making art keeps me very busy. I never have enough time to think about what I am doing, so I just keep working.

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Appendix C (continued)

**Jason Wonnell - Stock Pile**

The tools of war and the tools of media are related to one another more closely and in more ways than it may seem on the surface. Among the first companies to develop and produce televisions were aviation developers that also made fighter planes and bombs. Today, with stock trading, corporations, and corporate subsidiaries, these relationships have become less obvious but no less extant. Mainstream media is sold to us as a separate entity from the war machine. However, not only are the tools of media and the tools of war made under the same roof, but media itself has proved to be a powerful tool of war time and again. When watching a television I find it hard forget that it is war that makes such technologies possible and it is mainstream media that ultimately makes more wars possible. My television sculptures and installations are intended to blur the line between media and war. The televisions are intended to be seen as the machines of destruction they can be. However the narrative of these pieces are left ambiguous and esoteric, leaving room for the viewer to develop their own opinions and dialogues.
Appendix D

Exhibit Invitation designed by Alex Halbrook
VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Erin Smith

e.lee.smith@gmail.com

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Bachelor of Arts, English December 2003

Research Paper Title:
Project: A Case Study in New Media Art Curation

Major Professor: Robert Spahr