

A Tale of Two Museums

The 2017 ARCS conference in Vancouver, Canada delivered a diverse programme over three days. Well attended were sessions relating to the management of time-based media collections, drawing on expertise and experience from registrars grappling with problems that arise when tasked to manage these collections.

Of particular interest was *A Tale of Two Museums*, presented by **Grace Weiss**, Assistant Registrar of Media Arts at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMoMA). Grace's paper not only addressed issues relating to the management of art of a variable media type including time-based aspects, but also how co-ownership is a viable acquisition method whereby organisations can blend their strengths to successfully manage some of the most unconventional and challenging works.

In 2013 SFMoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) jointly acquired William Kentridge's *The Refusal of Time* (2012). This work is an immersive media installation that was commissioned for documenta 2012, Kassel, Germany and is composed of five-channel video, eight audio channels, four metallic megaphones with inset speakers, and a kinetic breathing machine called "the elephant". Grace listed a multitude of parts, including accessories, seven Mac Minis, Reaper software, one amplifier, four speakers plus five digital projectors to reveal a complicated work that presents a dynamic display lasting thirty-minutes to explore the history of time and how we mark its passage.

Technology aside, this work is site specific, ever evolving and includes both tangible and intangible elements requiring ongoing dialogue with the artist and his studio to ensure Kentridge's objectives are realised. The long-term preservation and display of this work demands a strategic response, not to mention resources, and in the case of SFMoMA and the Met, a solution focused team to tackle problems that are inherent to select media.

Grace included a quote from Pip Laurenson (Tate) which applies to how SFMoMA and the Met have approached the co-ownership of Kentridge's work, but also an industry wide desire to better understand and document contemporary works that have both tangible and intangible characteristics:

"The installation will always be richer than the specifications, and... it is becoming clear that there is a need for individuals, within collections and museums, to learn how to install these works and pass this knowledge on."

What was apparent early on in Grace's presentation was that Kentridge's work is by no means static. It changes with every iteration and registration staff, in collaboration with colleagues, are actively documenting each installation so knowledge is retained, referenced and developed. Thus, when the work is not on display, documentation becomes the primary reference. In many respects, a work such as this is accessioned, but the file is never closed. Rather it requires diligent tracking.

Grace introduced her audience to the DOCAM Documentation Model which is used to document the lifecycle of a media artwork. It appears to function well and is a useful tool other organisations might consider when multiple departments are required to contribute content when files are active and documentation is continually developing. In addition, Grace referred to the Guggenheim Iteration Report and SFMoMA Media Wiki which SFMoMA successfully use to manage such collections.

At this point, Grace reviewed the lifecycle of Kentridge's work to date, noting the various media additions made to this work over time, for example the inclusion of twenty school chairs post acquisition, the later addition of a spool and stanchion, plus the migration to BrightSign media players. Grace referenced the role of the artist and the studio in this process, and the need to capture their instructions for future iterations. Quite quickly one recognises how important SFMoMA's Media Wiki tool is. Without it, a lot of information which is interdepartmental would simply be lost or not easily consolidated or accessible. Without this collaborative approach to documentation, the work would be at risk of falling into obsolescence, or with time the artist's intentions would be lost.

Pages from SFMoMA's Media Wiki tool were shared, which were helpful as each highlighted fundamental considerations for any organisation seeking advice about how to approach the management of such works. Included in the sample pages were installation instructions, technical narratives, safety information and evaluation reports. Add to that SFMoMA uploaded numerous images that document the work in various states, including at the time of acquisition, when the work was on display at the Met, and later when it was shipped to SFMoMA for its second museum iteration. It's a valuable resource.

The downfall of SFMoMA's Media Wiki tool in the context of a co-owned work is that this SFMoMA specific platform for managing this work cannot be directly accessed by the Met. That begs the question as to whether there is an alternative tool that would enable better collaboration when it comes to documentation as file sharing with a view to aligning records at the Met and SFMoMA must be time-consuming and dependent on staff to remember to share documentation as it's created. That said, the two organisations **do** share documentation which reinforced a fundamental principle relating to shared acquisitions -- a commitment to the partnership they entered when the decision to co-acquire this work was made.

The question and answer session was interesting as an enquiry related to how in the context of co-ownership, responsibilities and obligations are shared or differentiated. It was interesting to learn that some elements of the work, such as equipment, are owned, retained and maintained by each organisation while the artist's specially produced elements, such as the breathing machine, are shared and are the only elements of the work moving between sites. Also interesting, when required for loan the organisation that received the loan request manages the outward loan.

In closing, many delegates in the audience could relate to the challenges Grace identified as she presented common problems and useful solutions which we might

arrive at when we collaborate, and in doing so reminded us of our role as thoughtful and innovative museum professionals who as Laurenson rightly noted, will ensure knowledge is captured so works like that by Kentridge, survive the test of time.

Submitted by Gina Irish, Registrar
Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu
New Zealand