

Teaching media art conservation: An integrated approach

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The teaching of Media Art Conservation is based on a cross-disciplinary and integrated approach. As time-based media artworks consist not only of a wide range of materials and techniques, but also of elusive constituents such as sound, light and space, as well as immaterial features such as interactivity, chance and change, the traditional combination of art history and chemistry as auxiliary sciences in conservation is not sufficient to address this specialisation in all its complexity. Knowledge of analogue and digital electronic technologies, colour systems and advanced documentation methods, as well as research methods from the social sciences, is required, as collaboration with artists, technological experts, industries and museums is vital for the future of such complex artworks. With the support of a Comenius Teaching Fellowship funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO)–Netherlands Initiative for Education Research (NRO) in 2018, the Contemporary Art specialisation of the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage training programme at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) has been incorporating these strands while redesigning the curriculum. The inclusion of a New Media Art module offers the opportunity for students to pursue a specialised pathway in time-based art conservation. In the Netherlands, time-based media has always been included in the Conservation of Modern Art specialisation ever since its start at the Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg (SRAL) in 1998, although not as a major component. The subject has steadily gained importance since the training programme merged into the UvA in 2005. Student projects have started to include born-digital art, lighting and multimedia installations, ranging from slide-based and screen-reliant works to net art and virtual reality art, with exemplary conservation projects on works by Jenny Holzer and James Turrell, for instance. Over the years, not only has the way in which the subject is delivered changed, but so too has its place in the four-year curriculum at the master's and postgraduate levels. The core has remained artwork-driven research, for which Dutch museums, the RCE Collection and the new media art platform Lima fulfil substantial roles, providing workspace, case studies and expertise. As with students from related training programmes in Bern, Vienna and Stuttgart, and in line with recent developments at NYU in New York, each student works on a specific case, for which the art historical and technical context is explored to design active and preventive conservation treatment proposals. In addition, various workshops on new media techniques, artist interviews and reflective practice help students to apply the new knowledge gained during hands-on work under the guidance of the supervising conservators and technicians. This training context promotes a rich learning environment, in collaboration with museums, collections and specialised institutions. Working together with artists, museum professionals and technical experts in an artwork-driven approach provides the basis for an innovative form of education, which is tailored to suit the individual student's preferences while fitting seamlessly into museum practice. This allows for a sustainable embedding of the required expertise, preparing the new professionals in such a way that they can take the lead in addressing complex issues, in parallel with the ever-changing technological developments and anticipating shifts in organisational structures – ready to cross boundaries and build bridges.