

Documenting contemporary artworks for reconstruction

Research Design

Research Questions

- *Why is documentation of contemporary art important?*
- *What is the role of archivists in the documentation of contemporary art?*

Research Objectives

- *To propose documentation strategies that can support the sustainable reconstruction of contemporary artworks.*
- *To explore the role of archivists throughout these processes.*

Research Methods

- *Literature review & case study: Three artworks from Busan Museum of Contemporary Art*
- *Interviews and content analysis with art archivists*

Documentation Framework for Reconstruction

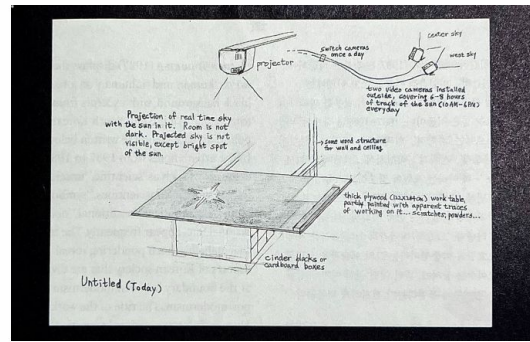
Type of Installation - based New media art	Documenting Area	Documenting & Acquisition Method	Records curation & Acquisition	Archivist's Role
Digital Image	Concept & artist's intention	Artist interviews, notes, concept sketches	During early planning and creation process - Artist, Curator	Management of authorship information; collection of early versions of the work
Interactive Art	Technical Installation & implementation	Drawings, equipment lists, technical standards, installation guidelines, video/timelapse	Pre and Post installation - Artist, technician, and conservation experts	Support for collecting essential technical information; archiving of installation & implementation process
Time-based Art	Spatial Configuration & Decision-Making	Floor plan , Lighting & sound setup records, Meeting minutes & decision memos, Rehearsal footage	During installation and implementation - Curator, technician, installation supervisor	Provision of checklist for essential documentation items
Communication Art	Audience participation	Audience feedback, Audience flow/movement tracking, Documentation of audience participation process	During exhibition - Archivist	Collection of interaction data; archiving of key agent perspectives
Technology-based Art	Work of Collaborators (Experts)	Technical expert interview, Technical expert's work notes, Documentation of the collaboration process	During and Post installation - technician, artist	Interviews with technician; organizing for future reinstallation and reproduction
Common (Exhibition-related)	Exhibition context & work history	Exhibition proposal, Press release, Curator interview, Exhibition & conservation history documents, Record of changes, Reproduction manual, Certificate of authenticity	Pre, during, and Post-exhibition - Curator, conservation experts	Compilation of exhibition-related records; documentation of curatorial intent

Based on López Iniesta (2021), This framework classifies types of media art to identify essential documentation elements. It organizes key items, methods, timing, and agents, and includes potential areas for archival participation. The checklist was developed accordingly.

Checklist

Requirement	Media Type		
Artist interview documentation	Video		Document
Early sketches & idea records	Document	Image note	
Work concept & intention	Template		
Installation diagram & spatial plan	Image		Document
Equipment lists & technology standard	Template, Memo		
Notes about Installation process & manuals			
Documentation of Software version			
Notes & documentation about Installation decision	Template, Memo		
On-site photos & video documentation	Photo		Video
Rehearsal recordings			
Audience interviews	Video		Document
Audience feedback records	Image		Document
Questionnaires after exhibition	Survey		
Sensor data of human Interaction			
Technician interviews & collaboration notes			
Documentation of operating Work	Template, Memo		
Expert-related records			
Gathering of exhibition proposals & artwork selection records			
Press releases and reviews			
Reinstallation/recreation checklist	Template(List, Checklist)		
Authenticity of works documents (Certificate of authenticity)			

Without documentation, the work couldn't have been exhibited nor reconstructed!



[L] Bahe Yiso <Untitled (Today)> (2000/2024)
[R] Bahe Yiso, Installation Drawing for <Untitled (Today)> (2001)
An installation piece reconstructed for the 2024 Busan Biennale after the artist's death. Reconstruction based on the artist's installation drawings.
© 2024 Busan Biennale, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea

Case study

Report

Tobias Rehberger <Yourself is sometimes a place to call your own> (2008)
© Busan Museum of Contemporary Art 5th Anniversary Report [BUSAN, MUSEUM, CONTEMPORARY]
▲ This work is an example in which individual components of a single installation were collected as separate holdings.
A manual documenting how these components are assembled into a unified artwork was collected along with them.

[L] Kwon Eunbi, <Geomorphology of Labor: 12 Scenes> (2021)
[R] Exhibition Guide for Busan MoCA Collection - Kwon Eunbi: Geomorphology of Labor - 12 Scenes
© Busan Museum of Contemporary Art
▲ This work was acquired by the Busan Museum of Contemporary Art in 2022 and has been on display since July 2025. In preparing for this exhibition, the curator conducted further research on the piece, during which additional records—such as an interview with the artist(2025.06) and a newly created exhibition guide—were collected.

[L] Shin Mookyoung <our contemporaries> (2010)
[R] Shin Mookyoung <our contemporaries - phone> (2013)
© Busan Museum of Contemporary Art
▲ This is a new media artwork that integrates numerous components, lighting, and technology. It requires regular condition checks, during which new records are accumulated. Its operation is primarily documented using time-lapse video.

[L] Shin Mookyoung <our contemporaries> (2010)
[R] Shin Mookyoung <our contemporaries - phone> (2013)
© Busan Museum of Contemporary Art
▲ The inspection process for collection items needs many people. In the case of Shin Mookyoung's work, the artist, archivist, and technician collaborated closely. The process was documented using time-lapse video.

Archivist's View

Interviewed 3 art archivists

Archivists have specialized expertise in designing systematic documentation tools and strategies tailored to diverse types of artworks.

As the need for reconstruction grows in on-site engagement, Systematic documentation collection offers a valuable opportunity to highlight and redefine the role of archivists.

Archivists are generally less involved than curators in close collaboration with artists and on-site engagement.

SWOT

The complexity and variability of contemporary art, coupled with limited archival training and research, highlight limitations that traditional documentation methods can no longer address.

Hong Seo-yeong

Student of Masters's Program in Archival Science
Pusan National University, Busan, South Korea

E-mail ghdtdud7989@gmail.com
Instagram @hingseoyeong

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