

Reflections on the Impossibility of Material Continuation

Wirtualne Ciało Sztuki: Ochrona i Udostępnianie Dziel Audiowizualnych (The virtual body of art: The preservation and access of audiovisual art)

by Elżbieta Wysocka

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Have you ever considered, or been challenged by, the recent artistic media based on film, video, and computer code, the so-called nontraditional media? These media are, in a sense, nothing new, because they are already a part of our increasingly mediatized culture. Digital media cast their shadow on every aspect of modern life; they both form our culture and are being formed by it. Changeable by nature, digital media question established views considering what an artwork is, or might be, and what is being exhibited and preserved, as well as what enters the realm of cultural memory and in which configuration. Being in the process of continuous reformulation, inscription, and reinscription, digital artworks move between formats and platforms, seemingly unconcerned with the gravity of their physical carriage – media as vehicles, as it were, of the concept, a floating synthesis of an artist's mind and all those engaged in the work's genesis. But beware: the future of ever-expanding digital memory comes upon us, an immortalization, directed against forgetting and oblivion.

Content already is generated in mutable versions, variations, and clones: the digital cloud; the multinodal, networked systems of intra- and internet; web-based

mobile platforms; increasingly participatory applications; and peer-to-peer formats that lack any representational matter. They lack reference to any of the familiar object-based (or objectified) strategies that for decades formed theories of conservation. Imagine, then, the frustrated dreams of the stewards of heritage trying to preserve the nonphysical content of contemporary artworks and media as physical objects while clinging to materialist ideologies of conservation.

And this is precisely where Elżbieta Wysocka's 2013 *The Virtual Body of Art: The Preservation and Access of Audiovisual Art* comes in. It considers the singularity of the problem of the *digital* in a very clear manner by presenting the idiosyncrasies of "audiovisual works" – film, video, and digital media – from the perspective of their preservation, curation, and archiving. Wysocka sets her stakes high. Her investigations focus mainly on artworks that emerged in the postanalog era, when, as she puts it, the technosphere (governed by technology, challenging and changing the culture of materiality) augmented the biosphere (the domain of the living organisms, traditionally tied to the notions of physical matter). This is the environment of the user–receiver rather than the beholder. Wysocka's point of departure is the moment when information came to determine our environment and forever modified the ways we think about the artifactual world and its attending notions of uniqueness and originality. Artworks that refuse simple classification question the commonsense "empiricist" view of art and its traditional definitions.

Wysocka's book is the first extensive revision of the challenges of, and approaches to, film-, video-, and source code–based art that addresses a Polish

readership. Written from the author's professional perspective and based on her experience working in film archives (Wysocka is head of the Digital Repository Department at the National Film Archive in Warsaw), the book highlights the breadth of her engagement with the variety of themes raised by audiovisual media. Wysocka's book offers a comprehensive review of current international literature and addresses the pressing topics of preservation and the archiving of film and its derivatives. For readers unfamiliar with Polish, the book offers an English summary and a comprehensive bibliography. International readers will find especially appealing the insights into the heritage of Polish cinema – Andrzej Wajda and Julian Antonisz's filmmaking among others – that seldom have been discussed from the conservation perspective.

Wysocka's project opens with an extensive analysis of the shift in the understanding of artworks in relation to their material substrate. This analysis is accompanied by a reconsideration of the notions of uniqueness, authenticity, and originality that dominated traditional conservation for decades. The artistic and historic value of an audiovisual artwork, the dialectic of its specific material form, its communicative function (the transmitted "content"), and its carrier function (the physical apparatus) are discussed throughout the book. This dialectic plays into one of the most acute dilemmas at the intersection of curatorial and conservation practices, not only in Wysocka's field of specialization – audiovisual media – but also in other media in which physical form might be seen as separate from artistic work. In other words, the physical "vehicle" of these works might be conceptualized as serving the artwork's

intermittent performance rather than being a continuous, indivisible part of it (as with traditional painting and sculpture, where the canvas or marble is an indivisible part of an artwork). Examples might include conceptual art, multimedia installations, performance art, and events (happenings), among other manifestations.

The book provides an insightful review of the development of our increasingly mechanized and reproducible media culture and the accompanying redefinition of artwork on the cusp of postmodernism. Maneuvering between art and media theory, cultural theory, and aesthetics (and referring to authors such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, John Berger, Peter Burger, Margot Lovejoy, and Ryszard Kluszczyński, among others), Wysocka succinctly explains the genesis of the material paradigm that conservation theories, too willingly, it seems, embraced. She discusses the emergence and development of theories of conservation, including the “fathers” of modern conservation thought, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, John Ruskin, William Morris, Alois Riegl, Camillo Boito, and Cesare Brandi, as well as more recent contributors to the theory of the profession, such as Salvador Muñoz Viñas. It is mainly from the arguments of Brandi and Muñoz Viñas that Wysocka draws conclusions about audiovisual media. What does the original mean in relation to film? Which of its numerous genealogical strata – camera negative, processed negative, interpositive, internegative, and distribution copy – hold the most information for its potential preservation? How do the intrinsic qualities of the physical medium encode what the film becomes, on both a material and an aesthetic level? Next to these questions, film preservation also poses striking dilemmas regarding the meaning of damage, deterioration, loss, lack of patina,

and past (restorative) manipulations, valuing each of them differently in specific cultural-temporal and institutional contexts.

Wysocka's book is a well-conceived attempt to offer a multitude of perspectives on the media in question. It focuses on whether a heuristic, investigative approach to the "object of conservation" is indeed feasible. Providing historical-theoretical context, and touching upon the idiosyncrasies of digitalization, the chemical and physical properties of film and its derivative formats, in intrinsic multiplications and replication in new media, as well as archival techniques of scanning and remastering, this book equips the reader with material for reflection and learning. Although its narrative is occasionally dense, the text is enlivened with discussion of numerous examples. The array of possible preservation approaches is demonstrated in the treatment of films as diverse as *Wajda's Lotna* (1959) and the work of materialist filmmaker Julian Antonisz, whose films-as-objects challenge the notion of the original's derivation from traditional arts.

But it is in the last part of the book where the reader fully encounters the problems of preserving digital formats. A discussion of film preservation leads to a consideration of internet art. The book closes with reflections on apparatus, remediation, and adaptation, providing a better understanding of the meta-discourses surrounding the preservation of audiovisual media but also situating nontraditional media within a broader discussion of recent art. Although this is certainly not a work for conservation neophytes, it repays close reading and would fit well within graduate courses in curation and conservation.

Wysocka conjoins thinking about conservation with a broader discussion about its subject matter, navigating engagingly through a wide array of literature, including art theory, theories of cinema, aesthetics, and media histories. The increasing professionalization of conservation has finally reached the point in which a wider, multidisciplinary approach and a multimodal structure of knowledge may address the material appearance and value of things and their traces.

The Virtual Body of Art suggests that the value of conservation discourse lies not only in the attempts to reformulate existing conservation theories but also in the acknowledgment of the diversity of media, the multiplicity of their forms and modes of existence. These *cultures of conservation* involve careful attention to multiple ways of interpreting the continuity of media, from present to future.

When we return to the book's title, *Ciało Sztuki*, which means the "body of art," we understand its implications. The subject is not static but rather a body that transforms, changes, and enacts itself in the arena of continuously shifting cultural, technical, and historical conditions (including those shaping conservation and curatorial discussions). While the adjective *virtual* might not entirely fulfill the promise of freeing us from the constraints of material objecthood, its decay, degradation, and obsolescence, it nevertheless makes the case for tolerance in the conceptualization of objects. Virtual, according to the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, is equally *real*.

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