

# The Virtual Body of Art

## Reflections on the Impossibility of Material Continuation

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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 non-traditional media? Certainly – you might say – these media are, in a sense, nothing *really new*, since they are already a part of our increasingly mediatized culture. Indubitably, 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 and in and re-scription, these 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 of all those engaged in the work's genesis. But beware: the future of ever-expanding digital memory comes upon us, an immortalization gesture of sorts, directed against forgetting and oblivion. The digital cloud, multi-nodal, networked system of intra and internet, web-based mobile platforms, increasingly participatory applications, peer-to-peer formats that lack any representational content, have already commenced generating a multiplicity of mutable versions, variations, and clones. They lack reference to any of the familiar object-based (or objectified) strategies that for decades formed theories of traditional conservation. Imagine, then, the unfulfilled dreams of these stewards of heritage that attend to materialist ideologies by wishing to conserve artworks as physical objects.

And this is precisely where Elżbieta Wysocka's 2013 published opus titled *Wirtualne Ciało Sztuki: Ochrona i Udostępnianie Dzieł Audiowizualnych* comes in, and at (just) the right time, too (Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2013, in Polish; English translation of the title: *The Virtual Body of Art: The Preservation and Access of Audiovisual Art*). It does so not by considering the singularity of the problem of the *digital*, but rather, in a very clear and consequent manner, by presenting the idiosyncrasies of what Wysocka refers to as "audiovisual works"—film, video and digital media – from the perspective of their preservation, curation and archiving. Wysocka sets her stakes high. Her investigations span mainly artworks that emerged in the post-analogue era, where, as she puts it, the environment of the user/receiver (rather than beholder) enhanced the biosphere with the technosphere, challenging and changing the culture of ma-

teriality, traditionally tight to the notions of physical matter. Wysocka's point of departure is the moment when information came to determine our environment and forever modified the way in which we think about the matter of the artifactual world and its attending notions of uniqueness and originality. The common sense "empiricist" view of art is questioned by the very nature of artworks that refuse simple classification and of which the vehicular media (understood here as the carriers of the media) serve the definitions only momentary, if at all.

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 breadth of her engagement with the variety of themes raised by audiovisual media leaves the reader satisfied.

Wysocka's book offers a comprehensive review of current international literature that addresses the pressing topics of preservation, and the archiving of film and its derivatives. For readers unfamiliar with Polish, the book provides an English summary and a comprehensive bibliography.

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 notion of uniqueness, authenticity, and originality, which determined traditional conservation for decades. The artistic and historic value of an audiovisual artwork, the dialectic of its specific material form, its communicative function and its carrier-function, the artistic and vehicular medium, in other words, accompanies the narrative 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 – the audiovisual media – but also in other media of which carriers might be conceptualized as serving the artwork's intermittent performance (such as examples of Conceptual art, and multimedia installations, including technology, performance art and event, among other things), rather than being a continuous, indivisible part of it (as with traditional painting and sculpture).

The book provides an insightful review of the development of the increasingly mechanized and reproducible media culture, and the accompanying redefinition of the

notion 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, too willingly, so it seems, overtaken in conservation theories. The book entails a discussion of 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 the latter two that Wysocka draws conclusions for 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 – holds the largest potential of information for its preservation? How do the intrinsic qualities of the carriers 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, patina, and past (restorative) manipulations, valuing each of them differently in specific cultural-temporal and institutional contexts. If the heuristic approach to the “object of conservation” is indeed feasible, Wysocka’s book is a well-conceived attempt to offer a multitude of perspectives on the media in question. Providing historical-theoretical context, and touching upon the idiosyncrasies of digitalization, and chemical and physical properties of film and its derivative formats, media intrinsic multiplications and replication as well as archival techniques of scanning and remastering, this book’s reading equips both the broadly and narrowly interested reader with material for reflection and learning. Although its narrative might occasionally appear dense, the text is enlivened with discussion of numerous examples. Among others, films such as Andrzej Wajda’s *Lotna*, 1959, and a most interesting early example of Polish materialist filmmaker Julian Antonisz (whose films-as-objects approximate the notion of the original known from traditional arts) endow the reader with a rewording experience of the versatility of the filmic medium reflected in an array of possible preservation approaches. But it is in the last part of the book that the reader encounters the problems of preserving digital formats most fully, as a deriv-



ative discussion that stems from film preservation, but also as an argument considering net-art. The book closes with reflections on the apparatus, remediation and re-enactment, which allows for a better understanding of the meta-discourse, not only regarding the preservation of audiovisual media, but also considering their intrinsic characteristics.

While this is certainly not a work for conservation neophytes, it more than repays close reading and would fit well within graduate courses in curation and conservation.

Wysocka’s book originated as a thesis (Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, supervision: Artur Tajber), the character of which might have slightly been retained in an overtone; yet her narrative is engaging on the levels of professionalism and care for detail – so characteristic, to be sure, for conservators in their zeal to exactness. Here, Wysocka fails to be satisfied with the virtues provided by her professional background as a conservator only. Rather, she 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 and aesthetics, and, no doubt, media histories. This book reconfirms my conviction that the increasing professionalization of conservation has finally reached the point in which a wider, multidisciplinary approach and skillful navigation through a multimodal structure of knowledge might include, but is not exclusively bound to, the material appearance of things and the value of material trace.

Finally, having read *The Virtual Body of Art*, I am even more inclined to contend that the value of partaking in conservation discourse lies not only in the (somewhat recurrent) attempt to reformulate existing conservation theories that occur unadoptable to technology-based and audiovisual media. Instead, the acknowledgement of the diversity of media – including the multiplicity of their forms and modes of existence – brings about careful attention to the multiple ways of interpreting their present and future continuity – the *cultures of conservation* (with my own contribution of writings on the notions of time, identity, and change in artworks).

Now we might also return to the book's title. "Ciało Sztuki", which translates from Polish literally as: the "body of art" – nothing static, but rather a body that transforms, changes, and enacts itself on the arena of continuously shifting cultural, technical, and historical

conditions (including those shaping conservation and curatorial discussions). The adjective "virtual" might not entirely fulfill the promise of freeing us from the constraints of material objecthood, and its decay, degradation and obsolescence, but it certainly leaves the potentiality for more tolerance in its conceptualization open. *Virtual*, according to the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, is equally *real*.

Elżbieta Wysocka, *Wirtualne Ciało Sztuki: Ochrona i Udostępnianie Dzieł Audiowizualnych* (The Virtual Body of Art: The Preservation and Access of Audiovisual Art), 488 pages, ISBN 978-8-36363-151-2, Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2013, 11,92 €