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BAM/PFA to Head Ground-Breaking Preservation Project for Digital Art

BAM/PFA leads a collaborative project to standardize the documentation and preservation of digital art in an era of fast-changing technology.

The University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA) is proud to announce a ground-breaking partnership with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and other renowned cultural institutions to address an issue critical to the collection and exhibition of digital art: how to preserve such works at a time of rapid technological change.

Although guidelines for the preservation of traditional art forms such as painting, drawing, and sculpture, are well established within museums across the world, at present there are no standards in place for documenting and preserving digital art. The collaborative project, called "Archiving the Avant Garde: Documenting and Preserving Variable Media Art," aims to create a model for preserving and documenting not only digital art but also other impermanent art forms including performance art, installation art, and conceptual art. This model could then become a standard used by museums and cultural institutions nationwide.

Partnered with the BAM/PFA for Archiving the Avant Garde are the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Rhizome.org, a web site dedicated to digital art and artists; the Franklin Furnace Archive, an organization that advocates for avant-garde art; and the Cleveland Performance Art Festival and Archive, Cleveland. Partners were chosen for the diversity of their collections and for the unique perspective each brings to the project.

Digital art has become increasingly prominent over the past decade. In 2000, the

prestigious Whitney Biennial included an internet-based artwork for the first time. The work-**Ouija 2000** by Ken Goldberg-which was first exhibited at the BAM/PFA and is now in the museum's collection, will serve as a case study for Archiving the Avant Garde. Digital artworks such as **Ouija 2000** present museums with an unusual set of challenges. Although the work itself is virtual, the means of bringing it to an audience-computers and the internet-exist in the real world. As technology changes and becomes obsolete it becomes increasingly difficult for institutions to display digital works in the formats in which they were created. Artworks that incorporate or are networked to pages on the Internet are lost when the Internet pages expire. Rather than archive the computer hardware on which the work was originally created, or transfer the work to updated software that might change its appearance or function, Archiving the Avant Garde aims to develop new strategies that will preserve the integrity of the artwork, and which can be adopted by museums internationally. These professional best-practice standards will make it possible for museums to preserve an important art form that already shows signs of disappearing, in some instances without a trace.

Archiving the Avant Garde proposes four different strategies for the preservation of varied media art: documentation, emulation, migration, and recreation. Documentation would create a record of the work, both its appearance and function, that could be followed again and again (similar to the way in which a music score enables a symphony to be recreated on many different occasions over time). Emulation and migration both focus on the computer code in which a work is created: emulation would make a new computer use older software, allowing it to show old digital artwork, while migration would replace outdated computer code with new code that could be run on a newer machine. In some cases, however, these strategies will not be possible or appropriate, and curators will need to use detailed descriptions and documents to help recreate the work.

Archiving the Avant Garde is a two year project that will include a series of workshops and conferences aimed at bringing together professionals working in related fields-museum curators and conservators, as well as artists, computer scientists-and the public. The project's final outcomes will be published in a guide that will describe best practices for the preservation of varied media art works. The guide will be distributed in both print and online versions and will be released in late 2004.

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