

NEWSGRAM

News in brief from the Conservation Center

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INSTITUTE of FINE ARTS
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Art With A Plug?

Christine Frohnert, Judith Praska Distinguished Visiting Professor, discusses her curiously-named course and her interest in electronic art with Professor Hannelore Roemich

This fall semester the Center welcomes conservator Christine Frohnert as the Judith Praska Distinguished Visiting Professor in Conservation. The Praska Professorship is made possible through the generous support of an anonymous donor and is named in honor of the donor's grandmother. Inspired by the Institute's Kirk Varnedoe Memorial Professorship, this new visiting professorship in conservation and technical studies will be awarded each semester to a prominent conservator or scientist who can help enhance our conservation program with new areas for research and teaching.

Ms. Frohnert completed her training as a paintings and sculpture conservator in 1993 and holds a graduate degree in the Conservation of Modern Materials and Media from the Conservation Program of the University of Arts, Berne, Switzerland. She joined the conserva-



Christine Frohnert in New York City working on the Berlin Wall segment at 53rd Street, between Madison and Fifth Avenues



tion department of the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany, where she held the position of Chief Conservator from 2000 – 2005. She worked at [Cranmer Art Group](#) in New York City as conservator of contemporary art from 2005 – 2012. She also provides consulting services to the Whitney Museum of American Art on the conservation of their media collection. She lectures and publishes in the field of conservation of contemporary art internationally with a strong research interest in the conservation of installation art created in the 1960s by the artist/engineer collaborations such as E.A.T. ([Experiments in Art and Technology](#)). Ms. Frohnert was Chair of the Electronic Media Group at the American Institute for Conservation from 2008 – 2012. She initiated the conference series *TechFocus*, to specifically provide education based on each electronic media category (*TechFocus I: Caring for Video Art*, Guggenheim Museum, NY, in 2010; and *TechFocus II: Caring for Film and Slide Art*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, 2012). She also serves on the board of the New York Regional Association for Conservation ([NYRAC](#)) and is Vice President of Independent Media Arts Preservation ([IMAP](#)). From 2009 – 2010 she was Adjunct Professor at the Conservation Center teaching the course: Modern Materials and Media in Contemporary Art. She

is currently teaching a seminar for art history and conservation students entitled, *Art With a Plug: The Conservation of Artworks containing Motion, Sound, Light, Moving Images & Interactivity*.

Let's join Hannelore Roemich, Professor of Conservation Science, as she catches up with her colleague and friend between classes.

Q *H.R.: In preparation for this Newsgram, I have selected the picture of you working on a fragment of the Berlin Wall on 53rd Street here in New York, removing recent graffiti from the wall. How did you feel about working on German history on the other side of the Atlantic?*

C.F.: Being German and living here since 2005, I now call both sides of the Atlantic home. But I certainly have a special emotional attachment to the Berlin wall. This was a project I worked on during my time at Cranmer Art Group. As a conservator, I'm fascinated by the ethical challenges that the removal of graffiti on graffiti poses. The perception of it is driven by the question, do we consider the Berlin wall to be history, world cultural heritage, art, or, just paint on stone? In this case, I was actually working on a segment of the Berlin Wall that contained an artwork by Thierry Noir and Kiddy Citny from 1985. Since the artwork is anchored in the cultural context of its environment, we decided to remove the later graffiti applied here in NY—the decision would probably have been different if the panels were still in Berlin.

Q *You are known to be an expert in electronic media art. Do you feel there are common challenges between the Berlin Wall and electronic media?*

The Berlin Wall has a material presence that is different from most electronic media artworks where we are addressing the conservation challenges caused

by technical obsolescence and ephemeral components. However, what both have in common is their specific relationship and dependency on time, space and concept. Let's stay in Berlin for a while and look at another political and artistic statement, *The Brandenburg Gate, 1992* by Nam June Paik. The video installation in the shape of the Brandenburg Gate is constructed of CRT (cathode ray tube) monitors and shows scenes from politics, culture and sports—different living conditions in West and East Germany. The artwork was designed as a walk-in sculpture with the same set of images on both the west and the east side of the work. Paik used this as a metaphor for the experience that differences were disappearing in a media world in the East and the West. The artwork was made shortly after the fall of the wall in Berlin and its presence and history are also deeply linked to the technology of that time. The artwork consists of 217 CRTs in five different dimensions. Each CRT body was specifically modified in Korea before the artwork entered the collection of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany. Even though the Museum was provided with sets of extra CRTs, the lifetime of the artwork is dependent on the ability to repair the existing CRTs and keep them running. Clearly, replacement with flat screens is not an option! The CRTs together build the sculptural integrity and the monitors act as an image carrier—as a panel or a canvas. Once the CRT's cannot be replaced or repaired anymore, the artwork can only exist in its various forms of documentation that we provide today to be saved for future generations.

Q *How and why did you get interested in the conservation of electronic media art?*

I certainly got interested in Electronic Media during my time at the Museum Ludwig. Well, I



Nam June Paik, *The Brandenburg Gate*, 1992, Museum Ludwig, Cologne

started as a traditionally trained paintings and sculpture conservator when I joined the conservation department of the Museum Ludwig in 1993. In 2000, I became Chief Conservator, so I was technically responsible for the entire collection of the Museum Ludwig, which also houses 450 media-based artworks including significant early works such as Rauschenberg's interactive audio-light kinetic installation *Soundings* from 1968. The engineer-designed system of this artwork is sensitive to different ranges of the human voice, so that different people who speak the same words will cause different visual effects, using four frequency bands that respond individually to different voices. Rauschenberg's intent was to create a one-to-one response, so people understand that art literally "talks" to individuals differently.

While traveling with *Soundings* during the Guggenheim's Rauschenberg Retrospective and installing the work in 4 different venues, I realized how sensitive and vulnerable technology-based artworks are.

Q *So, why are electronic media so sensitive and where did you learn how to deal with it?*

A simple mis-connecting and incorrect wiring of the audio intake can result in a fatally wrong installation of the artwork contradictory to the artist's intent and destroying its sensitiveness. As with all the other specialties in our profession, a deep understanding

of the materials and technologies sets the basis to care for those highly intangible and ephemeral artworks that are threatened by technical obsolescence. So, I was concerned how my skill set could possibly serve the needs of technology-based artworks when I learned about a conservation program that was just established at the University of Arts in Berne, Switzerland. The program focused entirely on the conservation of modern materials and media, which is still unique in the field. It was an intense time to go back to school for a second degree, but I made it and graduated in 2003.

Q *Do you think there is a need to teach electronic media art conservation?*

During my time as Chair of the Electronic Media Group (EMG) of the American Institute for Conservation I received numerous requests from institutions around the country in search of trained electronic media conservators. Since there is no formal education specifically targeting electronic media conservators in existence yet in the U.S., EMG started the conference series *TechFocus* to provide systematic education on each media category.

Q *New York and NYU—the right place and the right time?*

New York seems to be the logical place for electronic media education, since there is such a density of media art and museums collecting contemporary art in this city. In addition, New York City offers a unique network of technical experts with whom we need to collaborate within our young and growing profession. Within NYU, there is a high potential for internal collaboration with existing programs such as the Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) graduate program at the Tisch School of the Arts, the *Museum Studies* program at the Graduate

School of Arts and Science, and *Vision Learning Graphics*, which offers a fruitful environment. Furthermore, the increasing numbers of students interested in contemporary art at the IFA reflects the need to respond to this development.

Q *'Art with a plug' is a provoking title that you have chosen for your course this fall. What kind of challenges are you addressing in this class?*

The title was chosen to describe all the artwork categories that I wanted to address and that would not have been sufficiently covered with “time-based-media art,” “media art,” or “electronic art,” which would exclude, for example, “light-based-art.” What the artworks discussed in ‘Art With a Plug’ all have in common is that they are mediated through technology, need to be performed to be experienced, and unfold over time.

The terminology in our field is still under development and not precisely defined, and there is potential for overlap. One group assignment in class is particularly focused on the need for more clearly defined terminology. The students, recipients of the IFA/Mellon Research Initiative Student Grant for their “*Art and the Emergence of Technology: Timeline and Terminology Project*,” are developing a website that clarifies definitions within a timeline with reference to artworks created in the technologically interesting time span of 1960 – 1980.

The goal of the class is for students to understand why the conservation of ‘artworks with a plug’ is particularly challenging. For example, the condition of an artwork’s projector, stored away in a box, or videotape stockpiled in the vault, is concealed if the artwork is not activated. The importance of documentation is emphasized and an introduction to the international research projects and resources are covered. Within



Lisa Nelson '11 and Julia Sybalsky '12 visiting DuArt lab during the spring 2010 course, *Modern Materials and Media in Contemporary Art*, supervised by Christine Frohnert

the class, each media category and respective technology is introduced and their specific conservation challenges are discussed. By the end of the course I want the students to look at those artworks differently, with a sensitized and educated eye so they make use of what they learned and translate it into the acquisition, documentation, curating, exhibition, and conservation process.

Q *After your position terminates at the end of the semester, what are your next personal challenges?*

I founded a company together with Reinhard Bek, former conservator at the Tinguely Museum in Basel, Switzerland, who is an expert in kinetic art. As Bek & Frohnert, LLC we are the first conservation studio in the U.S. entirely focused on the conservation of technology-based art.

Q *Christine, we wish you success for your future career and thank you for this interview.*

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to teach this course and to work with so many talented students. I also learned a lot while working on the preparation of this class. Where else could I have gathered this wonderful experience other than at NYU? Thank you! •

—Hannelore Roemich

Hannelore Roemich is Professor of Conservation Science

photo credit: Christine Frohnert, Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne, Germany