



Enhancing Artistic Practice through Integrating Strategies for Preservation into the Work

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ABSTRACT

This paper shares insights from integrating strategies for preservation and dissemination into my ephemeral, affective art installations. Fruitful tensions and fundamental questions arising from curating these experiences are discussed in the light of artistic practices, preserving for re-performing and active facilitation of the personal archives of others. Curation is reflected on in the light of practices that were disruptive to the art world, especially: Fluxus and the historical use of visual and auditory means of reproduction for producing new works. Curation can facilitate lensing artistic works in relation to how they can be shared with an audience. This sharing can encourage artistic processes being used by others, the work becoming a tool, even a framework. This suggests that creating pieces that show how they are made, turning spectators into participants, noting their feedback, their social interactions and how they record their own experiences of the installation are all ways of enhancing artistic practice.

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KEYWORDS:

visual music; abstract animation; digital curation; art installation; experiential; practice as research

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Watkins, J. 2021. Enhancing Artistic Practice through Integrating Strategies for Preservation into the Work. *Body, Space & Technology*, 20(1), pp. 97–105. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bst.370>

There is a tension between traditional curating to make a display and curating as an expanded practice (O'Neill et al., 2016). Traditional curating usually involves selecting and interpreting the work in order to help the audience understand the context of the work and engage with the work. Non-object-based art challenges the traditional role of curators. This paper looks at curating as an expanded practice, using my installations of time-based media as a case study.

Pioneering independent curators in the 1960s, such as Lucy Lippard, expanded the concept of curation to include 'the articulation and production of art itself' (Buckley and Conomos, 2020: xxxi). Lippard notes that her curation involved: 'the deliberate blurring of roles, as well as boundaries between mediums and functions' (2009: online). This blurring led to a cross-disciplinary, 'Do It Yourself' response that seems apposite today.

'The cross-disciplinary Do It Yourself or DIY movement that is being rediscovered today in very different contexts by a much younger global generation was an integral element of this international network.' Lippard (2009: np)

A movement with a similar DIY ethos and blurring of roles was Fluxus. Founded in the 1960s Fluxus was an international network of artists and composers. Many prominent avant-garde artists joined the founder George Maciunas, including: Joesph Beuys, Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik. Maciunas wrote a manifesto for Fluxus (Phillpot and Hendricks, 1963: np), which included: 'promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art, promote living art, anti-art'. For Fluxus the aim of art was not to create unique objects. As Owen Smith states: 'Most Fluxus work was not just something that existed for its own intrinsic value, but had a principal concern with, and used mechanisms for, the education of the audience' (2002: 7). Inspired by John Cage they performed open-ended 'scores'. Cage's 'scores' did not provide musical pitch and rhythm but were a set of instructions in verbal or graphic form. Process was seen as vital. Fluxus' works were not fixed as they valued the evolution of the work and conceived of performances as examples of realized 'scores'. The role of the artist was not made precious and the work could be appreciated as an experience or process separate from the artist. The artists shared authorship with the composing artist and tended not to perform their own compositions. Works were cross-disciplinary: using new media and intermedia dissolved boundaries. Part of being in the network was to organise events, circulate scores for future events, create manifestos, archive group work, create histories and publish. Fluxus documented both their performances and their everyday life. Through their actions they sought a new paradigm in production, display, distribution and preservation. As Smith points out: 'Fluxus not only attacked the existing cultural forms and systems but also was an attempt to create an alternative distribution system' (2002: 8). Paradoxically Fluxus artefacts are now highly valued as art objects.

WHAT IS THE ORIGINAL OBJECT IN TIME-BASED MEDIA? WHAT SHOULD BE PRESERVED?

My installations of time-based media create many of the same challenges and opportunities that experiential art such as Fluxus and new media art created. As Beryl Graham posits: 'New media art is collected. It's just that it challenges many of the established definitions, histories, exhibition forms, authorship, economic systems, roles and processes of traditional object-based fine art' (2014: 24). This has an impact on what defines the work itself.

Pip Laurenson, the Head of Collection Care Research at the Tate, concludes that: 'time-based media works of art are installed events' (2006: 11). Therefore, like allographic works i.e. like performed works and, unlike autographic works such as paintings and sculpture, 'they are created in two phases' (ibid), i.e. the making of the piece and its installation or performance. Laurenson continues:

Their identity is defined by a cluster of work-defining properties... [for example] plans and specifications demarcating the parameters of possible change, display equipment, acoustic and aural properties, light levels, the way the public encounters the work and the means by which the time-base media element is played back (ibid)

When exhibiting the work curators may be guided by the artist's instructions, or previous installations of the work that the artist has approved can act as their model. Curation can help to preserve works that were created outside of the traditional art world's transactions, such as early internet art. Preserving works that were made in a spirit contrary to the traditional art world by being ephemeral and difficult to price is one aspect of creating a rich social memory and valuing artists as much as gate-keepers. As the curators Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito describe:

Owing to a lack of preservation and documentation methods, and thus access, such artworks [new media arts] often are not used in research and instruction; they become invisible to history. (Rinehart and Ippolito, 2014: 22)

SHOULD ARTISTS BE AWARE OF THEMSELVES AS CURATORS?

Artists curate their personal archives to suit their own needs. These may include materials and records personal to themselves of many types (photographic, audio, written) for developing their work. They may also archive elements that they create to share with others such as records of their making and of their final work. Personal archives: what we keep and what we organise, are filtered by individual's view of their life experiences, and by their emotions. A personal archive created by an artist reveals their character not only in the content of the archive, but also in the individual's attitudes to and modes of acquisition and management. The personal, the idiosyncratic and the sociological are intertwined in artists' curated personal archives. The archivist Catherine Hobbs advocates thinking: 'more of an archives of character than of achievement, more of documenting our complex inner humanity than our surface activities' (Hobbs, 2001: 135). This approach seems to echo an ethos of Fluxus. Acknowledging personal archives as being more about character than achievement could help artists recognize themselves as being their own curators. Furthermore this acknowledgement could create an approach for a professional archivist as they appraise, select, describe arrange and preserve a personal archive for later scholarly, evidence-based research. Terry Cook writes that in order to carry out the 'first responsibility' of archivists, i.e. appraisal, that it is vital to engage citizens and make them the focal point. He quotes Ariel Dorfman: 'there will be no trust unless we make efforts to disarm the most powerful, those who believe themselves the exclusive owners of the truth' (Cook, 2013: 186). Similarly, if non-traditional artists archive their own work with a view to sharing it they will forge new possibilities.

RECORDING AS A MEANS OF DEEPENING AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

Inviting the audience to record the work and themselves in the work further the deepens the audience's participation and the widens work's reach. For example, creating work that invites visitors into it and gives them the opportunity to photograph and video their own experiences of the installation. How visitors photograph and video their own experiences, how they curate their own archives is also key. As Linda Henkel's experiments (2014) with museum visitors demonstrate experiences of art are impaired by taking photographs unless they are tasked with taking photographs as a means of observation. One observational task was to zoom into features. She found that those who zoomed into features with their cameras even remembered features that they had not zoomed in on better. They observed more acutely. Further, in order to remember well we need to do more than take photographs, we need to access, review and interact with them. I found the appreciation of participants as they create their own personal archives can be palpable, for example when one participant first saw *Singing Light* his reaction was to dash away and bring back friends so they could all photograph each other in the light. Later they reported that this active recording of their experiences made the experience more memorable. Audience recordings widen the work's reach. Simultaneously this gives the audience opportunities to curate the work, which might be positive or problematic.

INTERTWINING MAKING, DISPLAY AND CURATION

There is historical precedent for going beyond preserving works to affording the possibility of making works. Almost one hundred years ago, the painter, photographer and Bauhaus luminary Laszlo Moholy-Nagy advocated using means of reproduction for producing new works

(Moholy-Nagy and Passuth, 1987). He asked key questions: what is this means of reproduction used for, what is its main purpose, and could its functionality be extended into production? He gave several examples. Using the phonograph, creating new sounds on wax plates without using acoustic phenomena, solely by incising grooves. Using bromide plates without cameras to record displays of light, including radiography and projected-light's evolving kinetics. What would be the result of utilising his approach by posing the same questions today? What is this means of curation used for, what is its main purpose, and could its functionality be extended into production? Fluxus, a highly influential, disruptive precedent could be re-thought in today's terms.

INSIGHTS FROM CURATING MY OWN ARTISTIC PRACTICE

A core aim of my practice is to elicit new connections, to broaden and deepen my thinking through experimentation and making. The artist and scholar, Simon Penny defines artistic practice as a practice that: 'embraces an open ended experimental process which allows for expansive inventive thinking' (2000: 412). I created affective, immersive, ephemeral art installations that could enable open ended embodied experiences, new experiences of light and sound to reflect on. In *Singing Light* the projected abstract animations were accompanied by wordlessly sung sounds in a darkened gallery space. [Figure 1](#) On entering the gallery the audience stepped into the installation and became participants; the art installations were experiential, in the mode of a performance [Figure 2](#).



Figure 1 *Singing Light* (Watkins,2018), from inside the volumetric light tunnel. Photo Luca Portik Copyright 2018 Julie Watkins.

When creating *Singing Light* I experienced an epiphany, it was the moment I stepped into the beam of my animation and found I was surrounded by a tunnel of light. There is a visceral surprise in a projected line of light becoming a three-dimensional tangible shape that one can step into and touch. This visceral surprise affects participants in the same way. There is a sense of marvel.

Participants in *Singing Light* took a moment to reorient themselves in the tunnel of light before they reacted and took videos of each other and 'selfies'. They posed for each other and were socially aware, giving each other space to make their own recordings in the light uninterrupted by others forms and shadows. The soft beams were always changing and looked inviting. After a while some participants became more confident and touched the beams; they raked their fingers through the haze and played with creating shapes and casting shadows. The participants were aware of being in the artwork and talked quietly with each other about their experience. When the sung sounds welled up out of the darkness they became silent. Looking at their reaction they appeared mesmerized by their experience and their comments were overwhelmingly positive. This is a selection of anonymous comments: "Beautiful", "Meditative",



Figure 2 Spectator- participants entering *Singing Light* (Watkins, 2018) Photo Julie Watkins Copyright 2018 Julie Watkins.

“Lovely”, “Mesmerizing”, “Light always fascinates”. **Figure 3** Pleased with ‘selfies’ in the light: “This is so going straight on Instagram.” “Love this” “Wow, it is great to interact with it” “The space is like infinity” “It is very sweet to see people interact with the light.” “Amazing illusion of 3D.”



Figure 3 Participants mesmerised by the light effects of *Singing Light* (Watkins, 2018) Photo Julie Watkins Copyright 2018 Julie Watkins.

SOME CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES WHEN PRESERVING EPHEMERAL WORKS

Having created artworks to enable individualized, personal responses I wanted to record the participants’ reactions but was very aware of the fragility of encounters with art, of potentially interfering with personal experiences. Therefore, I recorded as discreetly as possible using a static video camera suited to the very low light conditions. The video archive of the piece shows the scale of the piece and situates participants in it. Different views of the experience are given. The

footage plays in real-time. The footage shows the ways in which the participants are inside the work. But it would have been intrusive to catch the audible gasps of participants on seeing the tunnel of light for the first time. It would have changed the moment. A static camera in the corner lacks dynamism but is not intrusive. Coming close with a camera to capture the participants' expressions as they physically played with the light would have intruded on their experiences. Above all the immersive and affective qualities cannot be saved in a recording. You need to be inside the installation. This means that each individual has a truly unique, and unrepeatable, experience on each occasion that they participate. This is not felt when seeing a recording of others in the installation. As the performance scholar Peggy Phelan stated: 'Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented' (1993: 146).

Reflecting that I was focusing on the journey rather than the product helped me to situate my practice. I realized that I don't regard myself as a performer, but as an artist practitioner and academic. As the music theorist Jonathan Dunsby found performers 'naturally preferring to concentrate on the fleeting goal, the product, rather than on the journey, the substantial process by which they arrive at the goal' (200: 234). Whereas, Daisy Abbott and Emma Beer's survey of over a hundred academics and practitioners (2006) found, as I found in my own practice, that the documentation of process and the documentation of the final performance or product are equally important. Unlike a traditional curator I do not interpret my work for an audience. My ethos lies with experiential and educational aims similar to Fluxus. I share the experience of the work, and my techniques and methodology with participants.

The realization of the impossibility of creating a full archive and therefore the ephemerality of the work has led me to extend the reach and longevity of the work by disseminating the making of the work in the work itself. I showed how it is constructed with the aim of helping others to use aspects of it in their own work. The installation itself became an act of preserving for re-performing and allowed other practitioners to carry on my open ended experimental process. I had all the works behind the piece on view.

Participants could examine the animation that creates the light tunnels and the separate animation of the changing coloured light and how the haze machine interacted with the light
Figure 4.

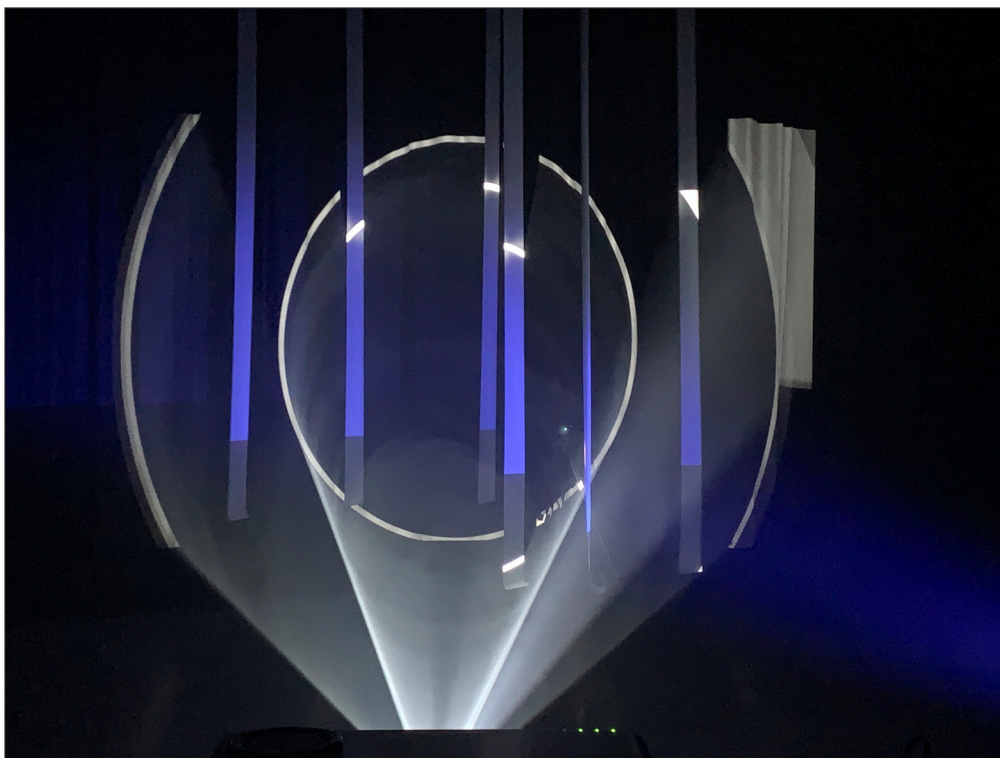


Figure 4 Animated rings creating tunnels of light from *Singing Light* (Watkins, 2018) Photo Julie Watkins Copyright 2018 Julie Watkins.

Additionally, I explained how the effect works in detail and how to create similar morphing tunnels of light. Participants have given me positive feedback on this aspect of my work. "I am so going to do this." "Haze will be so fantastic to work with."

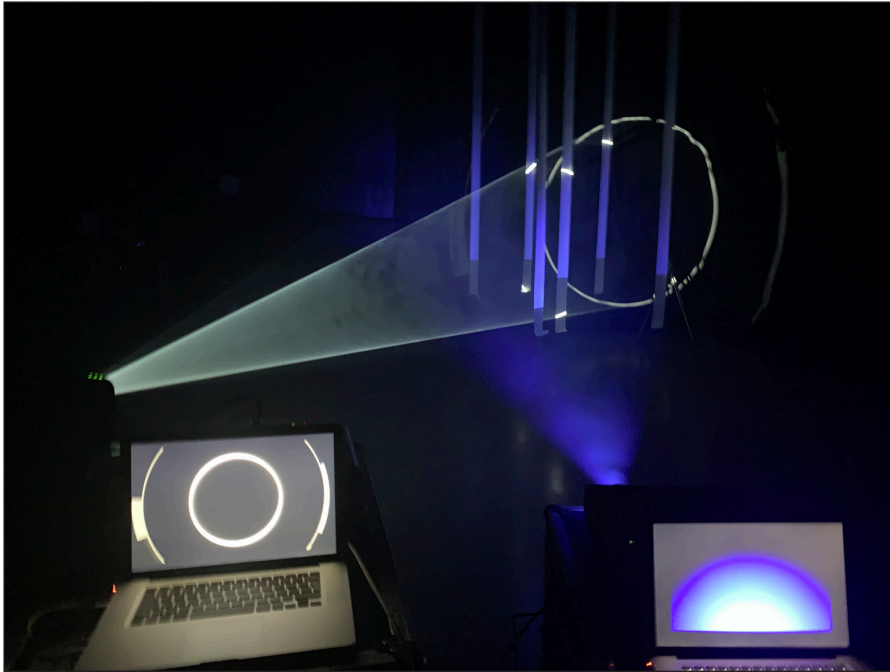


Figure 5 Showing the elements that combine to create *Singing Light* (Watkins, 2018) Photo Julie Watkins Copyright 2018 Julie Watkins.

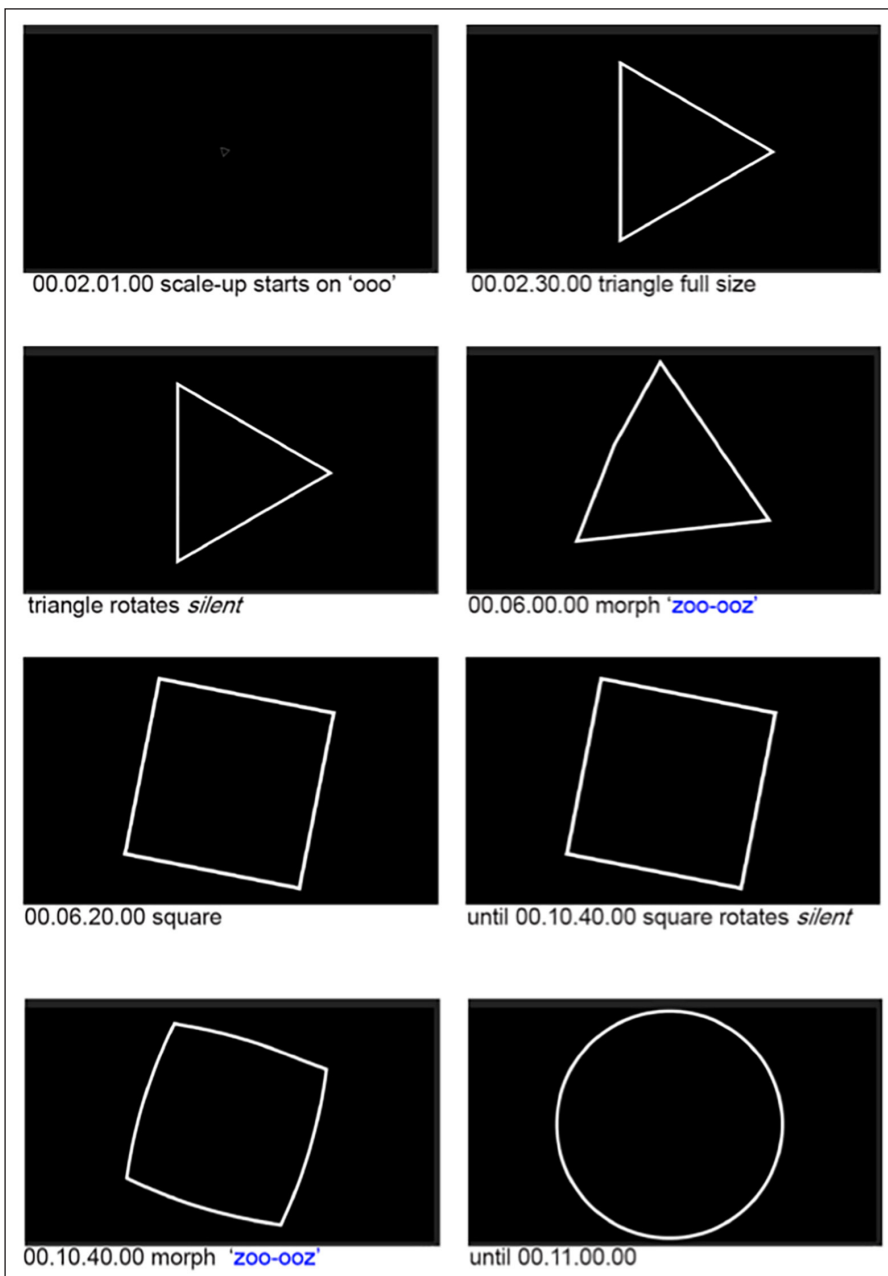


Figure 6 Keyframes from *AnimatedShapes* that form the light tunnels of *Singing Light* (Watkins, 2018) Illustration Julie Watkins Copyright 2018 Julie **Figures 5** and **6** Watkins.

In my own practice I have curated my work through moving image, photographs and writing, including producing a framework for composing visual music that others might use (Watkins, 2018). This includes having an awareness of lensing artistic works through how they can be shared with an audience. Conceiving of and creating pieces that show how they are made, turning spectators into participants (Watkins, 2019). I aim to work with participants rather than an audience. Part of my curation is to note participants' feedback and their social interactions. My experience has been very positive. Additionally the work ripples out. As the artist Douglas Rosenberg points out the audience not only responds to the work but:

[It] embodies the work and moves it out into the larger culture of dance and media, into their own practice and into their social situations through discourse and reiteration. (Rosenberg, 2009: 86)

Sharing the work can be seen as an on-going, evolving curation, and the work can be designed to share. Reflecting on my practice in the light of curation my aim has become to follow Edward Lordan's exhortation to: 'Integrate your activities so that members of your audience can take full advantage of everything and every way, you have to communicate' (Lordan, 1999: 16).


COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Dr. Julie Watkins is a senior lecturer in Film and Television at the University of Greenwich. She worked as lead creative in prestigious Post-Production facilities in Soho and Manhattan. She designed concepts, led Technical Direction, Animation, Motion Graphic and Visual Effects Teams, for Commercials, Broadcast Graphics and Films. She taught at New York University. She joined the University of Greenwich in 2006, initiated a Film and Television degree and partnership with the BBC. She had a solo exhibition in London in 2019, and has regularly presented papers and shown work at conferences including: DRHA, SOUND/IMAGE and EVA.

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Watkins
Body, Space & Technology
DOI: 10.16995/bst.370

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Watkins, J. 2021. Enhancing Artistic Practice through Integrating Strategies for Preservation into the Work. *Body, Space & Technology*, 20(1), pp. 97-105. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bst.370>

Submitted: 06 November 2020

Accepted: 04 January 2021

Published: 05 March 2021

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