

SPECIAL TOPIC
Digital Media and Cultural Heritage Conservation

Handout #1 : Syllabus and Tentative Outline of Class Sessions

September 5th version—updates will be posted on the course website :
http://www.sfu.ca/cmns/faculty/marontate_j/386/06-fall/

Overview

Cultural heritage conservation provides surprising insights into the interplay of material and symbolic practices that are important for understanding communication in contemporary society. This course will explore issues raised by digital media and other forms of “time-based”¹ media for preserving memories of today (and of the past) for tomorrow.

The course will begin with a critical examination of the history of cultural heritage institutions and the development of ‘traditions’, standards and practices that focused on the preservation of ‘things’. Mandates and professional codes of ethics developed in the twentieth century for cultural heritage institutions (like museums and libraries) were largely premised on storage of documentation or objects as records of creative acts and lived experience (ex. artworks, artifacts, monuments, specimen collections, data sets, publications and so forth).

Then we will examine the challenges and opportunities afforded by new media in cultural heritage preservation. The place of electronic media will be considered from two different perspectives: computer-based media as a tool for preserving and disseminating other forms of cultural heritage (ex. “digitization” initiatives) and the preservation of “works” created using digital media or time-based media as cultural heritage.

New technologies for creating, recording and disseminating images, text and sound offer possibilities for expanding what is collected by heritage institutions, for example, documentation about so-called “intangible” heritage (such as performed and spoken arts). However digital media involve impermanent materials, systems and hardware that rapidly become obsolete and may rely on interactive interfaces with “users” or “performers”. In such cases conservation traditions developed for older forms of cultural heritage are difficult and sometimes even impossible to respect.

Contemporary conservation practices include migration (the practice of transposing works into new media, such as converting analogue recordings to digital format, or upgrading software), emulation and reinterpretation or re-creation (for example in performance art). Such strategies often entail overt decisions to prioritize some elements of original works and preserve some types of cultural heritage while sacrificing others. How are such decisions made? Who can (or should) make them (creators, collectors, publics...)? When conflicts arise what principles prevail? Diverse interpretations of what constitutes culture, who “owns” it and how it can be shared have shaped preservation practices. Contemporary conservation issues related to digital

¹ . The terms “time-based media”, “variable media” and “contingent objects” are used by conservators and curators of contemporary art, technology and culture to refer to a variety of practices, not all of which are based on digital media. For example, “time-based” art includes performance and works created using processes that involve interaction with publics as well as creative practices using ephemeral materials or processes based on systems that rapidly become obsolete (like internet protocols).

and time-base media provide opportunities for rethinking ethical, legal, aesthetic, scientific, technical, economic and political dimensions in a changing world.

Format

This is a seminar course. There will be lectures but student presentations and discussions are an important component to weekly activities. Assignments and class activities will involve some fieldwork (for example museum visits).

Grading Scheme

Seminar Participation/Attendance	10
Seminar Presentations & Short Assignment, Quizzes, Webpage	50
Multi-part Term Assignment (proposal, research paper and presentation)	40

In-class quizzes (30%): **October 3, November 7. (Note: the 1st version had an error here).**

Two in-class quizzes on covered in class, class activities, homework assignments and readings must be done in the designated class.

Short Report and Class Presentation about it (10%)

Select a case study report by a conservator or a curator involving digital, time-based or variable media and analyze the implications of the conservation approach, focusing on communication issues. Your approach may vary depending on the features of the case study. For example, some cases involve communication among various participants (such as creators, publics, and various types of cultural heritage professionals). In other cases the treatment may involve decision-making about multiple meanings and choices about which ones to preserve.

If you wish to do this as a team with one or two other classmates you must receive the approval of the professor. Note: All team members will be given the same grade for this assignment.

Case studies can be found on websites of various conservation networks, such as: The Variable Media Network (<http://www.variablemedia.net/>), The International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (<http://www.incca.org>), and the projects of The International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems (InterPARES) (<http://www.interpares.org/>). More sources will be discussed in class.

Refer to issues raised in at least two of the required readings in your discussion. Include a bibliography. Prepare a 3-5 page report and post a summary of the report on your webpage. Your short report is due the day of your class presentation. In your short report:

- identify and describe what is being preserved and why
- briefly discuss the context (and how the context may define mission and constraints)
- discuss the participants in the preservation strategy (Who was included in the decision-making process? Who was left out? What are the consequences)
- analyze the preservation strategy and discuss its implications (symbolic and material).

Course Web Site (10%)

Your web site should include a short introduction, a summary of your short report, a description of your term project topic and your approach, at least three links to web sites with material which is pertinent to your topic with a brief statement for each site stating why you feel the site is relevant and a link to the course homepage.

The web site should prepare other people in the class for a discussion of your work and interests

by raising thought-provoking questions. Try to get your classmates to think about some of the issues surrounding your research. Use this as a chance to be creative and have some fun with your research but try to remember to provide information grounded in actual observation and well-thought-out analysis which connects your ideas to those of others in the field of communication studies.

Website Deadlines:

- Initial posting by October 17th (deadline for sending me an e-mail with your URL).
- Entries for your short report are due the night before each report
- Entries about term assignment are due two days before your scheduled presentation.

Term Assignment (40%)

This is a multi-stage term assignment centered on a major term paper of approximately 5,000-6000 well-chosen words. [The body of the text should be around 10-15 pages double-spaced.] More details will follow.

A one-page proposal of a term topic is due on October 24th. After receiving approval, present the topic on your web site. You will also be asked to do an oral presentation about your research in a round table and to participate in a round table as a discussant. The assigned dates for the round table presentations will be determined in the first three weeks of term.

Due date for Term Assignment Topic Proposals: October 24th.

Round Table Dates: November 21 and 28.

Due date for Written Report: December 4th (before 4 pm).

Absences & Alternative Arrangements in Case of Illness or Personal Emergencies

Class attendance is required in this course. Alternative evaluation arrangements will be made only in the case of verifiable medical and personal emergencies. Marks will be deducted for absenteeism and for missing deadlines.

Readings

Handout #2 contains readings for the first three weeks. Other handouts will follow. Required readings that are not available in electronic format will be placed on reserve. More readings may be assigned and announced in class.

Tentative Outline of Class Sessions.

Changes will be announced in class.

Week 1 (September 5)-- Course Administration and Introduction. Cultural heritage conservation and perspectives in communication studies

Field Trip: visit the exhibition "[Raven Travelling: Two Centuries of Haida Art](#)" at the Vancouver Art Gallery 750 Hornby Street (visit begins at 11:10)

Week 2 (September 12)-- Collecting and Exhibiting Things. Theories of Culture and Museums.

Week 3 (September 19)-- Visual Images and Text as/in Cultural Heritage

Guest Lecture: Jessica Bushey, Digital Imaging Head, Museum of Anthropology, UBC
"She Shoots She Stores: Born Digital Images as Reliable and Authentic Records."

Week 4 (September 26)-- Time-Based Media and Cultural Heritage Initiatives in Institutional Contexts: Questions of Mission and Constraint

Week 5 (October 3)-- Who decides? Cultural Politics and Moral Rights as Conservation

Issues. Part 1: Authenticity, Intention and Ownership of Creative Works

Quiz #1

Week 6 (October 10)-- Who decides? Cultural Politics and Moral Rights as Conservation Issues. Part 2: The Preservation of Secret, Sacred and Private Knowledge and Practices

First Group of Short Reports on Case Studies

Week 7 (October 17): Sound and Audio in the Information Age

Guest Lecture: Dave Murphy, School of Communication will discuss "Our Syntonic Approach to Sound" An historical overview of sonic communication, Acoustic Ecology and the contemporary state of audio in the information age.

Workshop on Website posting and design by Dana Stewart.

Deadline for posting course web page and sending a message with the URL to jmaronta@sfu.ca

Week 8 (October 24): Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage in Memories of the World Projects

Second Group of Short Reports on Case Studies

Term assignment topic proposals due.

Week 9 (October 31): Preserving Performance?

Guest Lecture: Barry Truax "Live Performance and Fixed Media"

Week 10 (November 7): Issues in the Conservation of Built Heritage and Natural Environments

Quiz #2.

Week 11 (November 14): Understanding Destruction and Loss**Week 12 (November 21): Consensus and Conflict in Cultural Heritage Preservation**

Round table 1 (Presentations and Discussions of Term Projects)

Week 13 (November 28): Concluding Remarks: Cultural Heritage and the Cultural Future

Round table 2 (Presentations and Discussions of Term Projects)

Written Portion of the Term Assignment due December 4th.

NB: The School expects that the grades awarded in this course will bear some reasonable relation to established university-wide practices with respect to both levels and distribution of grades. In addition, the School will follow Policy T10.02 with respect to "Intellectual Honesty" and "Academic Discipline". (See the current Calendar, General Regulations Section).
