

Bill Viola's Surrender : Sustainability in Conserving Time Based Media



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Introduction

Conserving time-based media (TiBM) works has posed new challenges for conservators as these works can rely on specialized technology that has the potential to become obsolete quickly. When facing issues of obsolete technology, the conservators along with the artist and their studio or estate try to find solutions that will keep the integrity of the artwork while also addressing issues of sustainability.

Methodology

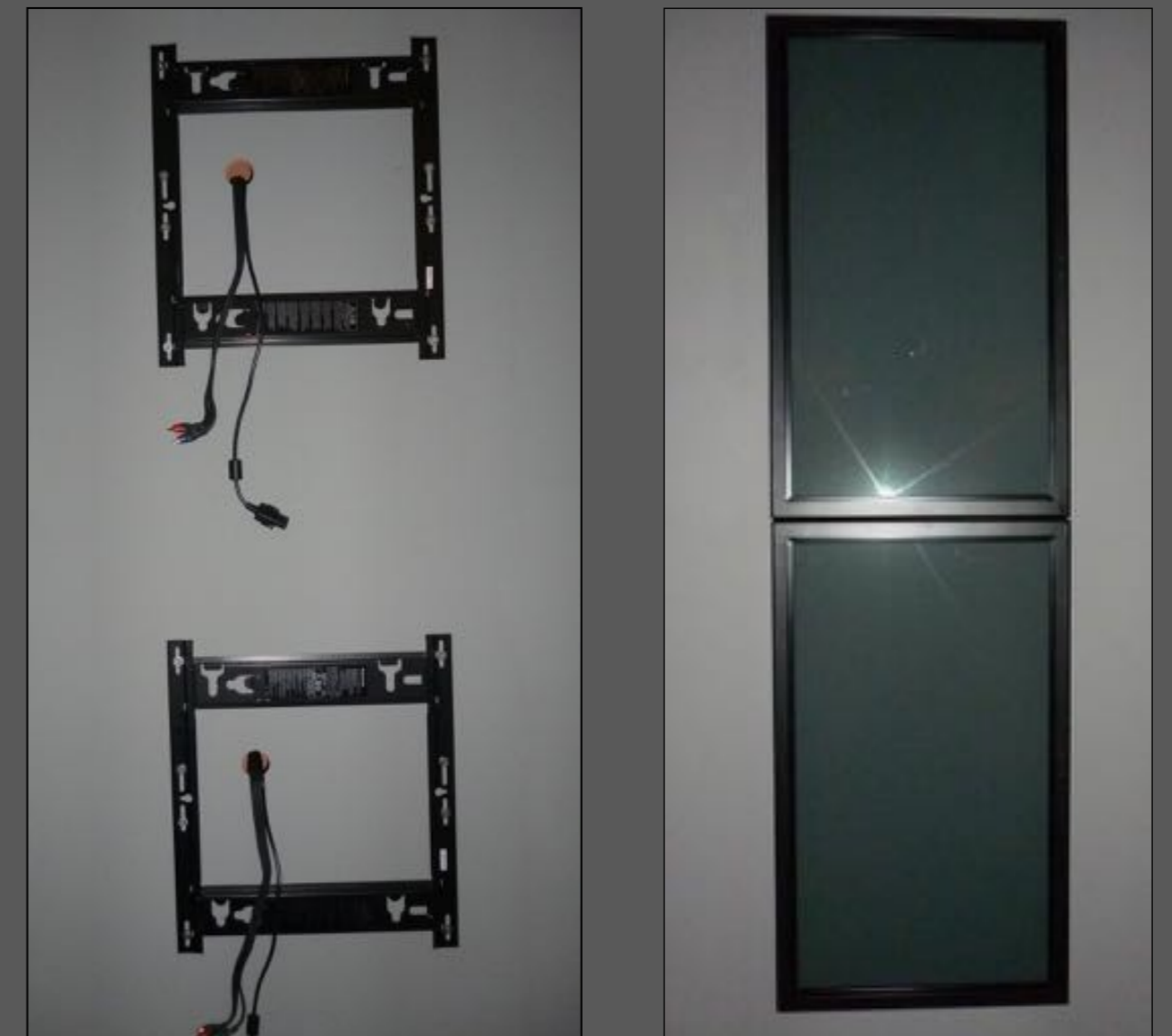
Details about Surrender's concept, installation, and equipment are among others documented in its Installation and Loan Condition reports. These reports are created to ensure that the work is displayed consistently according to the artist's wishes and can include various details about the technical installation of the piece. Once the specialized equipment for the piece has been identified and evaluated it can be assessed whether they are in need of replacement or repair. To find out which parts are becoming obsolete research into the expected lifetime of an object and their availability from manufacturers and or second-hand handlers has to be done.

Results

The two main equipment pieces that could potentially pose an issue in the future are the two 42-inch Sony plasmas screens, the two Pioneer brand DVD players, and their corresponding DVDs and synchronizing unit. Manufacture of plasma screens has become rare in recent years and certain companies have discontinued them all together. These plasma screens also have a certain colour quality that differs from more common technology such as LCD or LED. The DVD players are also at risk of becoming obsolete and the DVDs used as carriers appear more fragile in comparison to newer technology used to store digital files.



Pioneer DVD player, courtesy of National Galleries of Scotland



Two Panasonic 42-inch plasma screens and their corresponding wall mounts, courtesy of National Galleries of Scotland

Analysis and Discussion

In this case, updating the work is not as straightforward as replacing the equipment with newer technology. Bill Viola and his studio have particular requirements for the equipment especially the screens and the DVD playback unit. If the DVD player were to be updated with newer technology such as a media player, the synchronizing unit would have to be updated and reprogrammed by the artist technician and the files of the DVDs transferred. However, these updates do pose a more sustainable option as they are less fragile than the DVDs and are currently less likely to become obsolete. In the case of the screens, there is the element of their aesthetic importance as they form an integral part of the work's visual appearance. Although some of the latest screen technology can mimic the colour scheme of the plasma technology their dimension have moved towards larger sizes beyond 42-inches.

Conclusion

Surrender is an example of a TiBM work that has very specific equipment requirements provided by the artist and his studio and any changes to the equipment have to be closely negotiated. In this case, changes to the screens and DVD players will most likely be initiated by the artist and their studio. However, this is not always the case with TiBM works and sometimes institutions have more control over the equipment being used in the work.



Bill Viola, Surrender, video on plasma screen, 2001, National Galleries of Scotland

References

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