Intervista a Jack McConchie
a cura di Elisabetta Modena
e Sofia Pirandello

Jack McConchie (Scozia, 1982) lavora come Time-Based Media Conservator alla Tate Modern di Londra. Dal 2018 ha preso parte al progetto dedicato all'individuazione di specifiche strategie di conservazione per opere d'arte create con tecnologie immersive come il video a 360°, il real-time 3D, la VR, la AR e la MR.

SP **Jack, you are working on the project The Preserving Immersive Media which explores how to take care of artworks which use immersive technologies such as Virtual Reality.**

JM Yes. The project actually started in a funny way. It came from a documentation perspective: we were looking at our complex audio installations and we were thinking that for this kind of sound work, for instance, the only thing that existed as documentation was some photographs and a diagram of the space. I thought maybe we could try and do a better job of understanding what that work was like in that space, how it interacted with its surroundings. And so, we just started to experiment with capturing sonic recordings of spaces and 360° video recordings of spaces, purely as a documentation. It quite quickly became apparent that we were creating a lot of work for ourselves as conservators in generating all of this material, which is quite difficult to store and stabilise. I think we were exploring these strategies on quite a casual basis. Then somebody from Central Saint Martins contacted us. They were saying, "we heard you've got some knowledge in stabilizing Virtual Reality artworks", which we did in a way, but they slightly misunderstood what we were doing. I think it was from that

point that we said: "okay, well let's actually start investigating what we do to stabilize artworks born in VR!". So, we pulled from our knowledge of the documentation experimentation. There's also a lot of experience within the Department of Software-based artwork preservation and these two strands of research can merge to form a sort of strategy for what we do for preserving Virtual and Augmented Reality. I guess what we're dealing with is familiar in time-based media: The underlying problem is the technical obsolescence. With VR the obsolescence feels so unbelievably rapid, so unbelievably transient in these kinds of ecosystems. The problem is the complex interdependencies of hardware and software, both breaking and being updated all the time which breaks compatibility. Sometimes all it takes is a computer to connect to the internet, for something to auto-update for the artwork to be broken. For a tethered system for instance, the artwork executable program, the run times, the drivers, all seem to be getting updated so quickly. We have been working with this guy Jacob Bornecrantz who's developing something called OPEN XR standards. It's a kind of open standard layer that's being developed. That would sit between your real time 3D software and your VR hardware. This would theoretically make changing hardware a much easier process and crucially could minimise change to an artwork. We have had conversations with the Khronos group who are behind a lot of the open standards that we see in graphics processing about maybe having the interests of memory institutions represented as part of the ongoing strategy for these open standards, a voice for legacy support.

SP **If I got it right, it's something to adopt for every kind of file and headset. You are looking for standards.**

JM I think if we look at the software that supports that open standard, which is a lot of them, for instance Unreal or Unity. To speak that particular language of open XR would give you the best possible chance of sustainability for your work, to work with another headset in the future.

EM **Yes, I was wondering, who are the artists you are working with?**

JM We don't have any VR artwork that we are preserving at Tate. We are just feeding into a project about developing strategies for others, at the moment. One existing strategy is to try a stockpile multiple items of hardware and when one breaks, to replace it, and we know that's not going to be sustainable. The other thing that you can do is to emulate your software environments, so you encapsulate your operating system and running it in a virtualized or emulated environment. But then the communication with your hardware becomes difficult. We've explored incremental migration: maybe you have the assets or production files of a VR or AR experience and the software engine has been updated. So you import the assets into your new software engine and export them again for a new set of hardware. And each time you do that, there's this kind of incremental change. We call that *incremental migration*. This is really significant because the ways that lighting or texture or audio is rendered change all the time. You have to be aware of that, that's changing the experience. This open standard is another strategy which could give you the chance of exporting an artwork executable file with the capability to speak an open language, potentially experienced on a variety of changing hardware.

SP **I think this, as a consequence, lets you also work on a sort of media archaeology, am I right?**

JM Yeah, that's exactly it. The technology is to some extent tangled with the artwork and determining the experience and that feels easier to understand when we're considering like a screen or a projection or the sound. But I think VR and AR make it harder. To what extent is somebody just experiencing technology or experiencing an immersive environment for the first time or something? I think that's something you see a lot in a gallery environment where people put on a headset or an AR experience, and they move their head around wildly- there's a question there about that action being an exploration of technology. I suppose this is its relative newness. And when you start to explore that you discover these headsets have very different characteristics: the screens are different resolutions; the tracking works in different ways; the lenses are different. Part of our project consists of exploring some of the characteristics of the headsets and understanding what's going on inside them. It's interesting because it's not only archaeology, as you said, but it also

feels quite close and fast because it's subject to really rapid consumerism, it's a very competitive and fast technological landscape. I think that can create a quite protective feeling over the technology. It's not only more rapid and more complex, but also more private and more difficult. I think what we're always trying to do with artworks is understand that relationship and what the impact of change might be.

EM **And what about the relationship between the software and the physical space of the installation on the preservation side? I was wondering, how can we find a way to preserve both these two mixed parts of an artwork?**

JM Narration is something we have explored as part of our project. The tendency of capturing video footage can create a fixation effect which isn't helpful, you can just be capturing the wrong aspect or somebody can interpret the wrong thing from that video footage. For me one of the hardest things in conservation is the tendency to need a strategy to cover everything, which is difficult. I think what makes it easier is to find a different strategy for any situation. I think it puts the work first. You should ask "what is the work like and what does the work need?". I think that if you're asking not just "what is the work?" but also "What does it do? What is the artist describing here? What is somebody experiencing in it?", then you can pick up on certain aspects of that and work with that as a preservation strategy. Maybe the artist is completely not interested in the fact that somebody is picking up a headset for the first time, maybe she created this world and wants you to be able to access it in the most immersive way that you can. And we have worked with artists that certainly tend towards that experience. They're modelers in 3Dsoftware, and they're creating narratives and worlds. And as technology progresses, I think that they would just consider that as the opportunity for better access to their artwork. In that way that brings a kind of detachment from the technology. Alternatively, what some artworks are doing is really trying to create this kind of impact in using something that feels really like cutting edge or using something in a different way for the first time, so maybe that meaning changes over time and the preservation would have to accommodate this. Depending on how you encounter the physical space, the technology, the artwork, all requires a very nuanced strategy to understand the combination of the experience of the physical installation and the software and hardware. What are we going to do? And the answer for me, is it depends on the artwork.

SP **I think there is a tendency towards storytelling in general in VR and AR artworks. So maybe that could be another reason why one of the best ways to tell this kind of artworks is to construct a narration. I wanted to ask one last thing. I see that increasingly also important art institutions are becoming interested in virtual technologies, and the thing that you are preparing to preserve this kind of artwork seems to me that even an institution like Tate is interested in this kind of New Media artwork. What is your opinion about the institutional positioning about this kind of artwork? Do you think that it's like a curiosity or something that is going to be more and more important in the institutional artworld?**

JM That kind of question is kind of two-fold, isn't it? I think there's the collectibility aspect of it. Can we collect that thing? Is that a stable object? And that's part of the process, I think. The other side of that discussion I think is what would it mean for an object to be situated in the museum in a slightly different way. These artworks behave slightly differently or require different things of the institution. I think that's very much like a shift that is happening towards an idea of the museum, not being a deep colonial practice. The museum as not the source of knowledge of a particular thing anymore, but just a member of a network that supports an artwork, both in the community and in the digital sense. I think maybe what you're describing is this shift towards looking at how artworks can exist in a different way or have like a function within the museum. And one of the ways that can happen is digitally.

EM **I'm curious, Jack, do you like AR and VR?**

JM That's not fair! I'll say it right, but I'll mute my microphone! Yeah, I do, but it's complex, isn't it? I love technology. It's a technology with a kind of stigma, I sense a hidden institutional reluctance to it. I think it's also a technology which is subject to a sort of zeitgeist. This is not the first VR wave, there was a VR wave before, it was going to be the next big thing 20 years ago. I think

that technologies are constantly evolving and there is always gonna be new ways we can experience the digital. I think when you're in a VR or AR experience you tend to be more aware of its limitations, more than with other technologies because as you get closer to this fully immersive experience, you realize that the resolution isn't great or the movement isn't great and you become aware that some of your senses or your hands are missing in the experience. Of course, looking back on this period of how artworks used it, understanding how we experience its strengths and limitations, all of that makes its preservation so complex and rich! Hopefully all of that can help to tell the story of these times, these artworks.