

# Book Review: Re-collection: Art, New Media and Social Memory by Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito

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2014-10-25

*In **Re-collection**, **Richard Rinehart** and **Jon Ippolito** argue that the vulnerability of new media art illustrates a larger crisis for social memory. They describe a variable media approach to rescuing new media, distributed across producers and consumers who can choose appropriate strategies for each endangered work. **Hailey Maxwell** isn't quite convinced, and would like to have seen more in-depth analysis of the themes.*

**Re-collection: Art, New Media and Social Memory. Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito. MIT Press. 2014.**

Find this book: 

In *Re-collection*, [Jon Ippolito](#) and [Richard Rinehart](#) address the concern that without the creation of new, inventive and collaborative strategies, the social and cultural history of our generation will disappear into oblivion.

This concern has been established within the context of contemporary art for quite some time; the non-traditional character of artworks produced since the late 20th-century has naturally called into question traditional modes of conservation. These difficulties have continued alongside the trajectory of the postmodern assault on the status of the traditional art object; art-making no longer involves creating a static material object through painting, drawing, and sculpture to be contemplated by the viewer. Instead, art has increasingly grown to become the production of a performance or experience characterised by a dynamic range of materials. From [Marcel Duchamp's readymades](#) to [Vito Acconci's performance piece Seedbed](#), to [Eduardo Kac's transgenic animals](#), these non-traditional media present the curator and conservator with specific and complex challenges with regards to prolonging the artwork's life and presenting the work for exhibition.

As Associate Professor of New Media at the University of Maine and Director of the Samek Art Gallery at Bucknell University respectively, Ippolito and Rinehart are leading authorities in the field and here draw on their experience in the curation, research and teaching of New Media art. *Re-Collection* focuses on New Media art genres, that is, the genres of cultural production which use new, often digital or scientific technologies as media, and how these technologies pose the most risk to the survival of these types of artwork whilst paradoxically offering solutions to their conservation.

13 chapters are split into 5 parts, covering the role of 'Technology', 'Institutions' and 'Law' in the loss and preservation of art works, along with an Introduction and Conclusion. The authors present a comprehensive, easily accessible overview of the issues arising in this developing and turbulent area of research.

Despite the simple language, clear narrative path and helpful subheadings which structure the book, the myriad, disparate examples presented – ranging from the obsolete industrial florescent bulbs used in [Dan Flavin's light installations](#) to [copyright lawsuits directed at website The Wayback Machine](#) – complicate an understanding of any specific problem the authors are trying to address. It is my reading that the book intends to present the reader with an overview of the complexities and conundrums of the current climate of cultural heritage preservation, and



proposes a reevaluation of the current attitudes and methodologies of practical conservation. This style should provoke the interested reader, the art professional, and the academic.



A visitor at Felix Gonzalez-Torres' "Specific Objects without Specific Form" retrospective at Wiels, February 2010. Credit: [Mark Wathieu](#) CC BY-NC 2.0

The status of the contemporary artwork in the museum or gallery increasingly defies the object-spectator relationship. Contemporary art is consistently marked by the desire to interrupt and reinterpret the relationship between artist, artwork and viewer, creating scenarios where participation, immersion, interaction and relatability are essential. Ippolito seems to acknowledge this tendency; he offers three possibilities as viable strategies for preserving works of the New Media genre: migration, emulation and reinterpretation. These three strategies all involve some active alteration on the part of those responsible for prolonging the life of the art work, thus amounting to a set of techniques which acknowledge the absence or reduced status of the 'ordinary' art work. Furthermore, both authors impress upon the point that the conservation of culture, which they consider to be crucial tenets of collective, social memory, is made possible by a performative and collaborative effort and the intersection of ideas drawn from varied art world professionals, technologists, archivists, and members of the public.

I found the book interesting in terms of making clear to a wide audience that a change of methodology is required in assessing conservation of New Media artworks. Furthermore, the book reminds the reader that even digital artworks are living, impermanent objects which are subject to both environmental and technological change.

There are some weaknesses which should be addressed. It is never made particularly clear what the authors are referring to by 'social memory.' Rinehart quickly addresses the idea, hastily referencing a lengthy quote to give the half-hearted deduction that the nature of social memory is 'controversial, dynamic and ideological'. The stakes of this proposal are never quite addressed. The authors present no theoretical inquiry into what social memory might mean in the contemporary world, where there are (and always have been) a variety of ideological perspectives and relative positions of privilege which necessitate that the preservation and transmission of cultural history must be approached with a sharp critical eye. This marked absence of an analysis of social memory results in the absence of an evaluation of which, if any, New Media artworks might be valuable to this abstract idea of social memory or what the reasons for their preservation would be. The political dimension of cultural preservation is barely touched upon. No questions are raised as to what socio-economic dynamics are in play or what ideologies might influence exactly what is preserved.

Furthermore, there is little serious acknowledgement that some artworks are not built to last; that the conceptual meaning of the work resides in the ephemeral status of the artwork, for example [Felix Gonzalez-Torres' Candy](#). These artworks reflect our contemporary way of living which is characterised by an acknowledgement that life is vulnerable, transient, and impermanence. The unquestioned resistance to this concept is problematic. To quote Peggy Phelan, "The disappearance of the object is fundamental to performance; it rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject who longs always to be remembered."

While the book does not fully achieve its aims, it nonetheless presents interesting information and an innovative perspective which, I imagine, will become crucial to conservators and curators in the future.

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